ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY

THE BEST WILD WEST STORIES PUBLISHED

Issued Weekly. By subscription $2.50 per year. Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1905, in the Office of the Librarian of Congress, Washington, D. C., by STREET & SMITH, *79-89 Seventh Avenue, N. Y. Application made at the N. Y. Post Office for entry as Second-class Matter.*

No. 81 NEW YORK, NOVEMBER 4, 1905. **Price, Five Cents**

KING OF THE WILD WEST AND THE "BAD MEN"

OR Putting A Lid on the Territory

The "bootlegger" saw that he was caught with the goods. "Steady, boys!" said Ted. "The first man who makes a move toward his belt gets a Colt's pill."

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King of the Wild West and the "Bad Men";

OR,

PUTTING A LID ON THE TERRITORY.

By NED TAYLOR.

CHAPTER I.

FIREWATER TRAITORS.

When the young rough riders had returned to the Moon Valley Ranch from their hunting trip in the Mojave Desert they found that things had been going wrong in the Territory during their absence.

Their own men had been buying whisky, the sale of which was prohibited by law; and alarming reports were current, indicating that the Indians were in a bad temper, being dissatisfied with the distribution of their lands. The Indians' anger was being fostered by a number of outlaw white men, who were profiting by the sale of whisky to them.

The Indians on the reservations were threatening to make a clean sweep of the settlers, and were already running off cattle and feasting on them, washing their stolen meat down with bad whisky made illicitly within the district, as, by law, it could not be shipped to an Indian reservation.

Ted was very much disgusted with this state of affairs. It had become a serious matter, for the children of a settler, in the extreme upper corner of the Territory, had been massacred by the Indians. It was reported that they had fled to the Rosebud Indian Agency, where they were being concealed by the Sioux.

"I'll tell you, boys, we will have to take this in hand ourselves," said Ted. "As you know, I have been recently appointed deputy marshal. The authorities are either too busy to put a stop to it, or they don't want to take the trouble. The whisky makers seem to have some sort of a pull, or they are too smooth for the officers."

"We're shore ther ones who are gettin' ther worst of it," said Bud Morgan. "I find thar's erbout twenty head o' fine three-year-old steers missin', an' they're worth as much as so many Injuns. Early this mornin' I goes out an' finds one o' ther cowpunchers down at ther lower pasture boilin' drunk. When I asked him whar he got his poison, he tole me it war none o' my blasphemious bizness, an' I jest cracked him one fer manners. Then

boys won't tell whar they git ther rotten stuff, an' till we kin find out thar's no use tryin' ter do anything."

"Here comes Indian Agent Williams from the agency now," said Ted, looking out of the window. "Let us hear what he has to say. He may know where they get the whisky. If he does we will go after it and put a stop to it before there is a general massacre. We are able to take care of ourselves if the Indians should rise, but I fear for the poor settlers on the outlying creek bottoms."

"You bet you can count on us," said Ben Tremont. "There is no fun mixing cowpunching with the whisky business that I can see."

"They don't mix, ner never will," said Bud Morgan. "I seen it tried plenty o' times down on ther Pecos an' elsewhere, an' it always blowed up. Ther gov'ment hez put ther lid on this yere part o' ther country, an' it's ther bounden duty o' all good citizens ter see thet it stays put."

Mr. Williams, the Indian agent, now came in, and the boys greeted him gladly. He surely would be able to tell them something about the condition of the Indians, and perhaps knew who the persons were who peddled the whisky.

"Boys, we are in a bad way over at the agency," said Mr. Williams. "It's getting to be so that I can't do anything with the young bucks. The reservation is full of 'bootleggers,' who are selling whisky to the bucks, and even my Indian police are buying the stuff, so you can see how much chance I have of finding out who is selling it. To all my questions they simply say 'Don't know,' and that's all I can get out of them. But if it is not stopped there is going to be serious trouble, and the folks in Washington will blame me for it."

"What's the matter with the United States marshal's office that it is unable to keep the lid on the whisky business out here?" asked Ted.

"To tell the truth, the United States marshals are too busy looking after other criminals," answered the Indian agent. "I can never get them to come over and make arrests when it is necessary on the reservation. There are no fees for them in the business. Since the present marshal has been in office, outlaws, 'bootleggers,' or whisky peddlers, and every known kind of Western crook, has come into the country. The word has gone out that the marshal is easy, and indeed he is a weak man and inexperienced, but he has had a lot of deputies, forced on him by the politicians, who are not above suspicion. I believe some of these deputies wink at the selling of whisky for a share of the profits, which are enormous. An Indian will give anything he has for a drink of whisky, and when the bucks receive their payments for the land they invest every cent of their money in the awful stuff that passes for whisky in this country."

"Well, if the United States marshal cannot put a stop to the traffic, who can, or who has the right to?" asked Kit Summers.

"Any United States deputy has the right to if he wishes to do so," answered the Indian agent. "As a United States officer I have the power to make arrests, but it takes all my time keeping the Indians straight and off the warpath. I am seriously alarmed at the state of affairs that exist, but I can see no way at present to put a stop to it. You cattlemen could do it by concerted action, but I have spoken to some of them and they shirk the responsibility, and say that it is the duty of the United States officers to do it, and as they won't or can't, you have a situation that is rather discouraging."

"Ther Injuns hev been a-runnin' off our cattle," said Bud Morgan; "while I don't want ter butt inter yer business, Mr. Williams, I ain't none too sure thet it ain't ther bucks from your agency thet's a-doin' it, an' I want ter say thet ef I ketch any o' them at it thar's a-goin' ter be some 'good Injuns'—yer knows ther kind them is—dead ones—to put on yer records."

"That being the case, it looks to me as if it is to your business advantage to put a stop to it," said the agent. "If the Indians do not get whisky they will be peaceful and honest enough. But the whisky makes them reckless, and the whisky peddlers keep them excited and sore all the time, by saying that the settlers and cattlemen are working to prevent them from getting whisky, and have robbed them of their lands. It is bad business all around, and I wish I had the time and the power to put the lid on and sit on it."

"Boys, as Mr. Williams says, it is to our advantage to put the lid on and nail it down hard, and drive the 'bootleggers' and peddlers out of the country," said Ted.

"True," said Ben Tremont, "but what authority have we to attempt anything of the sort? Those fellows would simply laugh at us."

"In the first place we have the authority of good citizenship, by reason of our property interests," answered Ted. "I am for law and authority every time; but in the absence of the enforcement of the law by the proper officers I am going to defend my rights to conduct my business without interference by lawbreakers, and protect my property. I believe that the young rough riders would be perfectly justified in taking the enforcement of the liquor laws into their own hands, and prevent the sale of whisky to the Indians, because the disregard of the law is causing a loss of our property and the ruination of our employees."

"What do you all think?" cried Kit Summers. "I stand with Ted. Whether we have 'authority' or not, I'm ready to defend my share of the young rough riders' property in any way that comes up."

"I'm with you to the finish," cried big Ben. "We'd be a lot of chumps to sit here and wait for the authorities to take care of our business when they either don't care

or are unable to do it, and see our cattle go to feed a lot of drunken Indians. Not for me! I work too hard for what I earn to give it up to an Indian, who gets his living from the government for nothing. I am not saying that we should punish the Indians; but let us go after the whisky crowd and beat them first, and then run them out of the country. But if any bad Indian crosses my trail and steals any of my stuff, I want to say that I'm here to give it to him good and plenty. And I'm not particular sure that the government will try to make a very strong case against me."

"What do you think, Beanpole, Doc Fenton, Carl and all the rest of you?" asked Ted.

"What you say goes," cried the boys.

"Ach, vas iss der use oof monkey-doodelings mit der officers oof der law vat don'd make no officerings?" said Carl Schwartz. "I am down mit der visky effery dime, und I am a old sleuth mit my nose for der visky bissiness. I am mit der riders for rough all der jumps in der road."

"Gents an' feller cowpunchers, ye all talk like a bunch o' bananas," said Bud Morgan, "in thet yer entirely overlooks ther fact thet yer hev all ther authority necessary ter enable yer ter run down ther whisky peddlers an' arrest them an' destroy all ther booze thet yer kin find. Yer seem ter overlook ther fact thet we are all United States depooty marshals in an' fer this yere deestrict. Yere is my commission, ther which I will perpound fer yer benefit, an' yer all hev one identical with it. It is as follers, to wit, nota beany, pro bono pacifico, ad sum, an' then some: 'Know all men by these presents, that, reposin' especial trust an' conferdence in ther integrity, ability an' diligence—ahem—of Bud Morgan, I do hereby constertute an' app'int ther said Bud Morgan United States marshal's depooty. This app'intment to continue until revoked. Etcetry an' etsoforth.' Thar yer are. Good until revoked, which ain't been so far ez any of us knows on. Tharfore we're all United States depooty marshals, with all ther power an' authority ter perform ther dooties of said office,' ez ther commission sez, signed by ther United States marshal an' decorated with ther big gold seal o' ther deestrict court. What more do yer want than that?"

"That would be good enough for me to go ahead and act under," said the Indian agent. "It gives you full authority to search for liquor, and to confiscate and destroy it wherever found in the Indian country, and to arrest whoever is found introducing it. My advice to you is to go ahead and act on it."

"I move we elect Ted Strong, King of the Wild West, chief of the Moon Valley deputy marshals," said Ben Tremont.

This was carried by acclamation, without the formality of being put as a motion.

"Hurrah for Ted Strong's deputy marshals!" shouted the Indian agent. "And I wish to congratulate you on your pluck and determination to rid this section of the whisky peddlers, who can do more harm than anything I know of to whites and reds alike. If you clean them out the United States will owe you a deep debt of obligation. Ted will well deserve his title, 'King of the Wild West.'"

Ted thanked the Indian agent, who started back to his house on the reservation, leaving the boys to discuss the best means of going about the task they had voluntarily undertaken for their friends, the honest men in the region in which they lived.

While they were talking, one of the cowpunchers galloped up to the ranch house and shouted in through the door:

"'Three-Fingers' hez killed Bill Jennings jest now, an' ther boys hez started on his trail."

Jennings was the day foreman of the herd at the upper end of the valley, and "Three-Fingers" the cowpuncher Bud had reported as being drunk.

The whisky peddlers the young rough riders had just pledged themselves to round-up had taken the first trick in the game.

CHAPTER II.

ONE AGAINST MANY.

Ted rode over to Strongburg that day, and at the office of the Cattlemen's Syndicate, of which he was a member, met Col. Fothergill, "Cow" Suggs and several others. The office was in the bank, of which Ted and the other cattlemen in that part of the country were stockholders and directors.

To them Ted outlined the conversation the young rough riders had had that morning with the Indian agent, and emphasized the danger to that part of the country from the illegal traffic in liquor which was being carried on among the Indians.

"The young rough riders propose to find out who is making and selling the whisky to the peddlers, and after we get the distiller we are going after the 'bootleggers,' either to send them to the Federal prison or force them to leave the country," said Ted. "But we must have at least the moral support of the cattlemen in this part of the country. The criminal element of the Black Hills country will fight us, that is certain, and they will try to work all the crooked political influence they can against us. You know how far that will go, for even if we do catch the whisky peddlers we will have to make our cases against the whole whisky element."

"I feel safe in saying you may be sure of moral and financial support from all of us," asserted Col. Fothergill. "Col. Suggs and I had a serious conversation about this matter while you were away in the Mojave Desert, and brought it up at the last meeting of the syndicate. Some of the members were in favor of forming a vigi-

lance committee, but I suggested waiting until your return, for I felt sure you could advance some good ideas on the subject."

"What is it you fear from the politicians?" asked "Cow" Suggs.

"Our idea of going after this whisky business was to do our work as officers of the law with authority to enter into a systematic search for an illicit still, which I am sure exists near the reservation. The large amount of whisky that is being sold is not shipped in on the railroad to any station in this part of the country. I have made an investigation along that line, and have come to the conclusion that the whisky peddlers believe they could not afford to have it known that they were taking it from the stations. But it is being sold in large quantities. The only conclusion I can come to, therefore, is that it is being made close by," answered Ted.

"You are probably right," said Col. Fothergill. "But you haven't told us how you intend to proceed against these fellows legally."

"I was coming to that," said Ted. "You will remember that when we were having trouble in driving out the saloon keepers and gamblers, and securing the site of the town of Pettit for the Concannon children, the young rough riders were commissioned as United States marshal's deputies. These commissions state that they are to remain in effect 'until revoked.' They were issued to us because the marshal thought he could not drive out the Pettits and their gang. The fact of the matter is he did not want to. Some influence of which he was afraid was at work, and when we forced the order of the court upon him he put the brunt of the work on us."

"Well, you still have the commissions," said "Cow" Suggs. "You can go ahead and use them, can't you?"

"We can, and we cannot," answered Ted. "It all depends on the marshal. He has the power to revoke them on the instant. If more pressure is brought upon him than he can stand he will put us out of business as deputy marshals in a minute. It is here that I must have the support of the strongest moral element in the country, for we may no sooner begin to make it warm for the whisky fellows when we will find ourselves without authority to do anything. If we can make our bluff with the marshal stronger than that which the crooks will put up as soon as they learn that we are fighting them, well and good; if not, we might as well not go into it except in a guerrilla sort of way."

"Well," said "Cow" Suggs, slowly, "I reckon we can put up a pretty good bluff if it comes to that."

"The marshal's in town now," said Col. Fothergill. "I saw him in town this morning. Suppose we send out and find him, and tell him to come up here, and give him some straight talk on the subject."

One of the men in the bank was sent out to look for the marshal, who came immediately to the office of the Cattlemen's Syndicate.

He greeted them cordially, but at the same time did not seem entirely at ease. The combined influence of these men, and their good will individually, was a thing he desired as a politician, to say nothing of the fact that a good many of them were millionaires and owned most of the land in his district. But the marshal was not a very brave man. He had come to his work from an exceedingly peaceful community, where the worst men were only ordinary rowdies, and where such a thing as a Western "bad man" would have caused the inhabitants to flee in terror. He was, therefore, easily bluffed by the worst element with which he came in daily contact out in the West.

After Col. Fothergill had thoroughly explained the situation in which the honest element of the country found themselves, and told of the determination of the young rough riders to take the matter of clearing out the whisky peddlers, the marshal hemmed and hawed, and gave many excuses for his own lack of action, the chief of which was that his deputies had reported to him that the extent of the whisky business was greatly exaggerated, and that he had too much to do to look into the matter personally.

"Well, let that pass," said Ted. "If what your deputies tell you is true, so much the better. But what we want to know now—and we want a straight answer—is this: The young rough riders have commissions as deputies under you. Are they to remain in force? We are well known, and these gentlemen will vouch that we are honest, and will not abuse the authority vested in us. Have we your promise not to revoke our commissions until we can show what we can do?"

The marshal looked embarrassed, coughed, and, getting up, walked to the window, where he stood several minutes, looking out.

"I don't know as it would be very good policy to let a lot of boys go running about the country with commissions as deputy marshals, stirring up trouble," he answered, sourly. "No; I think I'll have to call those commissions in."

"Cow" Suggs rose to his feet, and his rugged face wore a wrathful look. He bent his shaggy eyebrows on the marshal, and thundered:

"See here, you, do you know me?"

The marshal turned pale, and nodded his head in assent.

"Then listen to me mighty careful!" continued "Cow" Suggs. "Do you want to hold your job? If you do, you better play fair and square with this crowd, and not go playing into the hands of the crooks. They can't do you any good. The President happens to be a friend of mine: We've camped and hunted together, and he knows whether I'm a liar or not. What I say to him is

not hot air. Now, do those boys retain their commissions until they do something that warrants taking them away, or are you going to do the dirty work of the whisky element of this district? Answer yes or no, like a man!"

This was pretty plain talk in the country of the Black Hills, and the men in the room sat tense, awaiting the result.

"The young rough riders may retain their commissions as long as you think necessary," said the marshal, in a voice that was not very steady. He rose, bowed to all, and left the room.

"Plumb bluffed!" exclaimed "Cow" Suggs. "No wonder he couldn't stop the whisky business! Now, it will be part of the duty of us old fellows to see that he does not go back on his word."

"I am glad that's settled," said Ted. "Now, we must jump into our work."

"And I'll promise you that you will find it right exciting," said "Cow" Suggs, with a laugh. "I was mixed up in just such business as this myself when I was a young fellow out here in the early days. Go in and win, boy, and you can count on me at every jump in the road!"

As Ted rode across the country toward the Moon Valley Ranch, his thoughts were busy with plans for the future actions of his young rough riders. He knew that he had a pretty hard proposition before him, and that he could expect no help whatever from the marshal; but, on the other hand, would probably meet with covert opposition from the man whose humiliation he had just witnessed.

But, first, he had a mission of justice and revenge to perform. He must run to earth "Three Fingers," the murderer of the day foreman of the ranch, who had always proved himself a faithful and capable man, able to manage the affairs of the ranch while the boys were in the Mojave Desert. That the foreman had fought the best way he could against the introduction of whisky onto the ranch, and that it was this that had eventually caused his death, Ted had no doubt.

"Three Fingers" must be run down.

Now and then he passed small bands of young Indian bucks, who looked at him with scowls. None dared openly insult him, for they had had evidence of his fearlessness and his swift methods of resenting and punishing any indignities; but they had been drinking, he could plainly see.

Further along the trail that led across the prairie he saw a confused mass of Indians and ponies, and presently heard the screams of a woman.

"What are those savages up to now?" he muttered. "Drunk, I suppose, and beating their women."

He kicked his pony in the ribs, and set it into a gallop. As he got closer to the Indians, he saw that they were all squaws, and that they were beating an Indian girl of about fifteen years with knotted ropes. The poor, little squaw was almost exhausted, and her bare shoulders were torn and bleeding from the cruel blows that had been showered upon her. She was in a fainting condition, and could only moan, with the agony she was suffering.

Ted rode among the squaws, scattering them with light blows of his quirt.

Then he saw that they, too, had been drinking whisky, and were insane from the stuff. Their bloodshot eyes and torn clothes, their tangled hair hanging in their faces, presented a horrible sight. They had been fighting among themselves, and their lords and masters had been easing their drunken wrath upon them, even as they were revenging themselves upon the young girl, who had, perhaps, caused their displeasure by objecting to their indulgence in liquor.

When the infuriated squaws saw who it was that had driven them from their prey, they set upon Ted like a lot of wild beasts, screaming like demons, and trying to tear him from his pony's back.

He tried to avoid them, but could not, for he knew if he forsook the young girl she would probably be torn to pieces by the frenzied women. He was compelled to continue using his quirt, and finally succeeded in beating the squaws off to a distance.

Then he returned to the Indian girl, who was almost dead from the beating she had received. He put her on his horse, and rode as fast as he could to the agency, where he turned her over to Agent Williams and the women teachers for attention.

As soon as the girl had somewhat recovered, Mr. Williams sent for her to come to his office.

"Where did those squaws get their firewater?" he asked the girl, in the Indian language.

The girl answered simply by holding up three fingers.

"Now we are on the track at last," said Ted. "We have two accounts to settle with 'Three Fingers'—murderer and whisky peddler."

CHAPTER III.

THE PRETTY FLOWER GIRL.

With the knowledge that "Three Fingers" was the distributor of whisky to the Indians, as well as to his own cowboys, Ted hurried back to Moon Valley. Now was the time for action of the swiftest sort, if they expected to catch the scoundrel.

When he arrived, he called the boys together for consultation.

He told them all that had happened, and called for suggestions as to their course. What did they know about "Three Fingers," where did he live, and where had he worked? These were the questions Ted asked, and

it was necessary for him to have the information before he could lay his plans.

"All I know erbout the whelp ain't very illuminatin'," said Bud, who had supervision of the cowboys, and kept track of them. "He calls hisself a cowpuncher, but I never seen a cow what complained o' his hurtin' her feelin's by a-punchin' her. I don' reckon he's punched anythin', exceptin' whisky, fer a long time. An', ez ter his hangout, it's lierble ter be 'most anywhars, ez far away ez he could git from a church."

"Let's have some of the cowboys in, and see if they know anything about him," suggested Ben Tremont. "Before 'Three Fingers' shot Jennings, you couldn't get a word out of any of them about the whisky. That's one of the strange things about the whisky business. A man who drinks it will never tell where he gets it, if he doesn't get it on the square. It's one of the ways in which the devil protects his favorite amusement in the way of ruining men."

The cowboys were called up to the house. They were all sore about the death of the foreman, who was a square man, and, although he had been a strict boss, had always been fair.

"Tony, I want you to tell me just what the trouble was between Jennings and 'Three Fingers,'" said Ted, addressing a handsome young fellow, who had a dark, and somewhat dissipated, face, and who was known as one of the wildest cowpunchers on the range. He was a loyal friend, and as good a fighter as ever looked along a gun barrel.

"I'll tell ye all I know," said Tony. "I didn't aim to say nothin' about this yere whisky business until this yere dirty piece o' work come off. I've knowed 'Three Fingers' for more'n three year, an' I knowed him like I know lots o' other punchers, come an' go, an' no sort o' friend or pal. He knowed I wouldn't take no slack from him, for I shoved the p'int o' my gun into his nostrils oncet, an' before I withdrawed he wuz beggin' like a kid."

"Where does he live?" asked Ted.

"I never knowed his hangout. All I know is that he's got an ole mother somewhar in this part o' the country, an' he's supposed to have a young sister, which some folks say is not his sister, who lives with the ole woman," answered Tony. "I reckon he don't live thar, exceptin' when he's wanted by the sheriff."

"Well, how about his trouble with Jennings?" asked Ben. "That's what I'm interested in. Jennings was one of my men, and he was not a bit fussy, and only stood for what was right."

"I didn't see the trouble, for when it come off I wuz up to the hay barn," answered Tony. "But 'Honey' Biggers, he seen it."

"How did it happen, 'Honey?'" asked Ted.

"Well," drawled "Honey," "it wuz this a-way: 'Three Fingers' he wuz down to the corral all mornin', givin' the boys a drink oncet in a while, an' blowin' about hisself bein' about the wust man in fourteen States, an' how he hed the marshal an' all the officers buffaloed to a standstill. We kinder give him the laugh oncet in a while, but he wuz good-natured, an' kep' handin' out the licker, an' a-h'istin' in a few hisself. He says as how he's makin' more money than ary feller in the West, an', as long as he divided it aroun' a little bit, no one could stop him hevin' his fun."

"Well, that was not all that happened," said Ted, as "Honey" hesitated in his story.

"No, it wa'n't," the cowpuncher went on. "The foreman he come along, an' 'Three Fingers' ups an' offers him a drink. Jennin's wuz real hot under the collar in a minute, an' he called 'Three Fingers' down somethin' scandailious, tellin' him to git off'n the ranch as quick ez he could saddle; that he didn't want no 'bootleggers' around the place, an', when he come by, to take the other side o' the mountains. 'Three Fingers' he got sorter white around the gills, an' I know he wuz goin' to do somethin', but, before I got inter action, he hed pulled two guns an' begin to shoot. He's got a reputation o' being the quickest man on the draw since the days o' 'Billy the Kid.' Jennin's he just throwed up both hands, an' wuz dead before he touched the ground. Before any o' us could git to our guns, which was all up to the chuck house, 'Three Fingers' wuz gone. When we got to Jennin's, we seen that he didn't have no gun on him, an' had no more chanct than a jack rabbit. It wuz ez dirty a piece o' killin' ez ever I see, an' this ain't my first season on the range."

"Did he offer to sell you boys any whisky?" asked Ted.

"Not this time, he didn't," answered Tony. "He was givin' it away, celebratin' somethin' er other, he said. But right after you went into the Southwest, he come aroun' an' said that, if we boys wanted the goods, he had it for sale. Some o' us told him you wouldn't stand fer it, an' he jest laughed, an' said he was a-goin' ter wash ther whole ranch with it, jest ter show you how much he cared fer the young rough riders. I cal'lated then he would git us all inter trouble, an' he shore done it."

The cowpunchers said that they had heard that "Three Fingers" had a still, and made the stuff, and employed a large staff of "bootleggers" to sell it for him. But they had told all they knew personally.

"Now, boys, we have our work cut out for us," said Ted, seriously. "Our first work is to find out where 'Three Fingers' lives, and if he makes his whisky there. If the still is not there, we must find it. While some of us are looking for him, the others will scout around. I will keep in touch with Strongburg, and the telegraph office there. Whenever any of you get next to anything, or need help, wire me at Strongburg, and I will get into

communication with the others. You must all keep me informed as to where you are, from time to time, for we must have some sort of organization. All the towns in this district must be watched, for it is in the towns that he will get the bulk of his trade. I will take Bud, Carl and Clay Whipple with me, and we will start on the trail of 'Three Fingers.' Ben, you pick a partner, and start out, and the others do the same. All must travel in pairs. Get to the towns, and let me know at Strongburg what you learn as soon as possible."

The boys immediately got ready, and in less than half an hour they were started on the trail of the murderer of their foreman, and to destroy the illicit liquor traffic by putting the lid on the Territory, and keeping it there.

Ted and his three companions in arms had no trouble in following the trail of "Three Fingers" to the settlement of Piute, a small place on the prairie off the railroad, which consisted of a few stores, a blacksmith shop and a few other buildings. Here the smell of whisky was all over the place. The "bootleggers" had gone on after leaving a supply. Bud stopped at the blacksmith shop to have a shoe fixed on his pony, and got to joking with the smith, who was a folly fellow, like himself. From him he learned that "Three Fingers" had arrived with his saddlebags full of bottles of whisky, which he sold at good prices, and rode on.

"Whar's the ole pelican gone?" asked Bud. "I shore am ez dry ez a four-year-old bleached bone. I'd like mighty well ter purchase some o' his wet goods, fer I jest got my pay, an' I'm sp'ilin' ter blow it. Ye'll do both me an' him a favor ef ye'll put me onter his trail."

"Waal, I ain't noways sartain, but I'm thinkin' he struck inter Sherman City, which ther same is over on ther railroad," said the blacksmith. "He said as how he wuz needin' some more goods, an' thet he hed a stock thar."

"Thankee, podner; yer done me a right smart favor," said Bud, who went to report this information to his chief.

The boys took the trail for Sherman City, and arrived there, by hard riding, at four o'clock in the afternoon. They all knew "Three Fingers" by sight, and Bud knew him well from several years' contact with him in punching cows. If the villain saw Bud first, he was likely to begin to shoot, for he knew that Bud was well informed about the murder of Jennings, and would think the old cowboy was after him. And "Three Fingers'" policy was to shoot first and ask for explanations afterward. Bud was, therefore, very cautious, and traveled by himself in the town, searching for the murderer and whisky dealer in such places as he would probably be found. But he could find no trace of "Three Fingers," although he met and talked with several cowpunchers who knew the scoundrel and had no love for him.

About five o'clock Bud joined Ted and the other boys, as they were standing against the corner of the hotel, looking at the people pass up and down the street. They were, of course, watching for suspicious moves that would indicate that liquor was being sold in the town, for Sherman City was a prohibition burg, and the lid was supposed to be on tight. But they saw nothing to indicate that there was a drop of illegal whisky in the place.

"My kracious koodness!" said Carl. "Yoost look at der leedle peauty mit der paskets oof flowers on her arm. Vich iss der sweetest, der girl or der flowers?"

"Say, is this ther first time yer even seen a little girl sellin' posies?" asked Bud, laughing. "Now, I wonder what sort o' fellers buys flowers in this man's town, which is plumb full o' cowpunchers, bums who are thirsty an' would-be gamboliers? Ef she wuz sellin' booze, now, I could jest give one holler an' sell her out in jig time."

While the boys were laughing, the girl's first customer approached. As he came out of the hotel, the girl reached into her basket and handed him the first bouquet she laid her hand on, which he took indifferently, giving her some money in exchange. Having made the purchase, he went back into the hotel, holding his bouquet very carefully in both hands. Her next customer was a shabby-looking fellow, with a red nose and blotched face. He approached her hurriedly, took his bouquet eagerly, paid her, and hurried on.

"None o' them don't seem as if he cared what kind o' a bouquet he gets, fer none o' them looks at 'em, or smells 'em, but jest hustles right along. I'm a-goin' over ter buy a posy," said Bud.

He sauntered up to the girl, and said, with his most winning smile:

"I'd like ter buy some o' yer pretty flowers." The girl looked at him a moment, then she shook her head.

"I cannot sell you," she said. "The bouquets are all ordered beforehand, and these are for customers only."

"I'm sorry," said Bud. "I'm very fond of flowers. Let me smell them!"

He stooped down and buried his face in the basket before she could give or refuse consent. When he straightened up, he looked her full in the face. It was as pure and innocent a face as ever he had seen. Her eyes looked at him with all the candor of a child's.

"Where did you get those bouquets?" he asked, in a most fatherly manner.

"My grandmother gives them to me to sell," she answered. "I pick the flowers, and grandmother and my foster brother make them up into bouquets."

"Who is your brother?" asked Bud.

"My grandmother told me not to answer questions put to me by strange men," she answered, with a touch of alarm in her voice.

Bud turned away, and sauntered over to the other boys.

"When I git a hunch, thar's something more than hot air in it," he said, laughing softly.

"Well, what did you find out?" asked Ted.

"Every one o' them bouquets is full o' whisky. The sweet, little gal is a 'bootlegger,'" answered Bud.

CHAPTER IV.

SELMA'S BLOODLESS BATTLE.

"Telegram for Mr. Strong!" said the telegraph operator, coming across the street from the railroad station. Ted had been in there, and had sent a telegram to Strongburg, to forward any messages that might come for him to Sherman City.

Ted tore the envelope open, and began to read the telegram. As he proceeded, he seemed to grow more and more excited.

He handed it to Bud Morgan, who spelled it out to himself carefully, and then gave a shout.

"Jumpin' sandhills! This yere is shore from ther seat o' war! I reckon we'd better be hikin' over thar!"

"Run down to the corral and get our ponies out and saddle them. Then meet me in front of the hotel as soon as you can," said Ted. "I'm going into the telegraph office to summon the boys by wire to meet us at Selma."

The telegram which had so excited Ted and Bud had been handed to Clay Whipple, who read it aloud to Carl. It was as follows:

"To Ted Strong, Strongburg:

"Come to Selma at once. Got biggest fight on hands yet. When prohibitionists heard we were in town, they asked us to help them in their fight against the whisky gang that is running the town. They immediately went out and dynamited one saloon. Whisky gang got together and drove us out of town. We rallied and came back. Had running fight in streets. Blew up another saloon. Are now out again, awaiting reënforcements. Summon all the boys you can, and come and help us put the lid on Selma. Kit Summers."

While Ted was finishing his telegrams to Ben Tremont, Beanpole and the rest of the fellows, Bud came up with the ponies.

"Where's our pretty little whisky peddler?" asked Clay Whipple.

"Sold out an' gone, I reckon," answered Bud.

"We'll have to let go now until we put the lid on Selma," said Ted. "But we must find her again, for I believe she is the key to finding 'Three Fingers,' and we cannot afford to lose sight of her. Say, but Kit got into it in a hurry, didn't he?"

"He's ther very identical boy ter do it!" laughed Bud. "Thet thar Kit boy hez a temper ez hot ez a Chili pepper—one o' these yere little red ones, what feels like yer'd swallowed a red-hot kitchen stove when yer bites inter it. But he's got a heart inter him ez big ez Pike's Peak. He's shore a scrappy young person, is thet same Kit Summers."

"It's six miles to Selma, across the grass, and ten miles around by the wagon road, which follows the railroad to save grades," said Ted. "I guess we'd better cut across the country."

"Sure thing," said Bud. "We'll hev ter do a little climbin' outer coulees, an' a-slidin' inter them, but, at that, we'll save time. Ef we hit her up right brisk, we'll make it before the whisky gang kin open another bar'l."

The boys galloped on at as good a pace as they could in the rough country they encountered. They had been traveling over an hour, when, as they were ascending a rough knoll, they heard shouts on the other side. They pushed on, and, reaching the top, saw a sight in the little valley that stirred them like a battle scene.

The valley was full of horsemen, whose rifles glittered in the sunlight.

Dashing in and out among them, they saw the slight form of Kit Summers, who rode with a certain distinction all his own. He was as light and lithe in the saddle as an Indian.

"Hi! yi-i-i! Yip! yip! yip!" Bud Morgan had torn loose a yell that could be heard as far as Selma, which could be seen shining in the distance.

"Yi-i-i! yip!" came the answer from the valley.

Ted and his bunch of rough riders galloped down the hillside, amid a rattle of stones, at the imminent risk of breaking their necks. The "antis," who were gathered on the plain, yelled at this exhibition of real rough riding.

The "antis," or anti-saloon party of Selma, were composed of the better element of the town, the business and professional men. They were not in the least fanatical, but they were opposed to the saloon keepers and gamblers running the town their own way, in open defiance of the law.

They had not only the stuff in them to put up a good fight, but possessed the daring, as well. And it was when Seth Warner, a young lawyer, who had come out from Massachusetts to carve a future, and, he hoped, a fortune, out of the West, had conceived the idea of blowing up one of the saloons, as a warning to the outlaws, that the people realized that the law and order element was in earnest.

Seth Warner was similar to the fellows who composed the Boston Tea Party, and he came of the same stock, as his great-grandfather had been one of the party of supposed Indians that tossed the tea into Boston Harbor in the cause of liberty.

When he suggested that they blow up the saloon, which was one of the worst in the settlement, the people said: "That is all very well, but who will do the blowing?"

"I will," said Warner.

"You'll be blown to pieces," they said.

"Don't you believe it," said the young lawyer. "When I was fighting for an education, I worked in a rock quarry, and I was the dynamiter."

"Do as you please," they said. "You are the man for us."

It was this gallant, young chap whom Ted first met when he rode down among the "antis."

Warner, by reason of his two achievements of entering the cellars of the saloons, setting the charges and the caps and connecting them with electric wires, and then warning the occupants to flee before he started the electric spark on its way, had been chosen leader of the "antis."

When Ted appeared, there was a general clamor for him to take charge of the fighting party, because of his reputation, and the stories of his exploits, which had preceded him. But Ted saw that Warner was not only brave, but full of expedients, and he told the people so.

At this moment, when Ted was asking the people to let Warner continue in charge of the forces, the young lawyer appeared, and told Ted that, if he did not take charge of the impending skirmish between the two contending parties, he would not fight himself.

"I did the dynamiting, Mr. Strong, only because I happened to be the only fellow on our side who knew how to use the stuff, but you are the natural leader here."

"All right, if you insist," said Ted. "But you were doing fine work, Mr. Warner."

They heard another wild, cowboy cheer, and in galloped Ben Tremont and half a dozen of the other young rough riders, and Ted knew that the day was won, and that with the boys to execute his orders and fight in his way, backed by the fine fellows from the town, they could turn any force that the whisky gang could produce.

Ted rode back a little way up the hill, turned and faced the horsemen on the plain below.

"Gentlemen," he said, "we are going to meet with desperate resistance in Selma. The whisky gang have the town, and they are nerving themselves for what is coming. They are going to fight desperately for what they have won. They are expecting us to rush in upon them pellmell, in a body. That is the idea of the old strategist. We will foil them."

He was interrupted by wild cheers.

"We will adopt the tactics which I have seen produce such successful results in Cuba and the Philippines," he said. "We will flank them everywhere. The members of the young rough riders' organization, who understand my methods, will divide you into separate squads of fighters. We will ride quietly toward the town. The whisky men will think we are beaten. Follow the directions of the young rough riders, and in an hour from now the lid will be so tight on Selma that it will never be lifted again."

The cheer that went up could be heard throughout the town, and for answer they heard a faint pip-pop-pip of pistol shots.

"Don't worry," said Ted. "They are wasting their own ammunition in a jolly."

Ted called the boys together, and gave them minute instructions as to their work, and they went among the "antis," who were gathered on the plain below, and picked out their squads. These they separated and led away, to instruct as to the particular method of attack laid down by Ted. The town men listened politely, but this was not the way they would have done it.

Maj. Hennessey, an old citizen of the town and a Civil War veteran, was for charging in a body. "That's the way we did it at Shenandoah," said he.

"It don't go now," said one of the young men. "Ted Strong's plan goes."

"I'm mighty glad ther ladies hev bin removed outer ther town," said Bud Morgan, "fer thar's goin' ter be somethin' doin' when we git in thar."

No bugle calls were to be sounded in this charge of cavalry. It was to be a battle of strategy, so far as the young rough riders were concerned.

Ted Strong rode out in front.

Each young rough rider had his squad well in hand.

The men lined up at the foot of the hill, divided into little bunches of horsemen, each one a cavalry squad, under charge of a competent sergeant.

Suddenly Ted Strong raised his hand.

His cavalry dashed off across the plain. As they advanced, they appeared to be charging in a solid body. This was what the whisky party in the town had expected, and their sharpshooters opened with a volley.

Ted was galloping far out in front.

He turned in his saddle, and waved an order, just as the saloon men fired.

Simultaneously, each rough rider raised his hand, and the horsemen galloped off to the right and left into a great circle.

The gunsmen of the town were expert marksmen, but the solid body they fired at had dissolved, leaving only small targets, which were difficult to hit, as they moved continually. When they saw that their enemies were surrounding the town, they left their concentrated position, and every man fled to protect his own saloon.

Therefore, as it turned out, the "antis" galloped into Selma from every side, and completely rounded up every crook as he fled, some to this place of refuge, some to that. With yells of triumph and a few shots from their revolvers, Ted Strong and his cavalry squads surrounded a whole town full of whisky crooks and gamblers, herding them in the twilight to the calaboose, in the center of the town.

The citizens hurried to their homes, to see that they were safe.

Later in the evening the townsmen repaired to the public square, to find that the young rough riders had emptied into the earth every drop of liquor in town. It was then decided to burn the saloons, which was done, and the heat from them soldered the lid on Selma tight.

"Say, thet wuz ther tamest battle I ever see," said Bud, when it was all over.

"Yes, but we captured the enemy," said Ted. "We haven't lost a man, and the saloon people are all in jail," said Ted. "That's one way of doing it."

CHAPTER V.

TED FINDS "THREE FINGERS."

After putting the lid on Selma, the boys again separated, Ted and his party taking the trail back to Sherman City to search for the little flower girl and her bouquets—concealed bottles of the contraband whisky.

This time, however, they took a trail that was not quite so rough as that over which they had come.

They followed the wagon road, and, when within two or three miles of Sherman City, struck a narrow bridle path that led off from the road, and apparently ran in the direction of Sherman City.

"Let us follow this trail," said Ted. "Evidently it is a short cut to town."

The trail went through rough ground that skirted the foothills covered with sagebrush. It was a wild region, and, until the recent opening of the country, had belonged to the Indians. Outlaws also infested this region, for the hills were practically impassable to one who was not thoroughly familiar with them. They were called the Ketcham's Hills, after a celebrated "bad man" of a few years prior to our story, who had made the hills his rendezvous, and who fled to them when things got too hot for him in the settlements. Ketcham was a cattle rustler and stage robber, and had gathered about him as versatile a body of cutthroats as there were in the Territory in those days.

When Ketcham and his gang "took to the hills," as it was called, the people in the settlements breathed easier, but dreaded the day when he would come out again, which would be when the officers ceased searching for him, or he had compromised with them in one of the many ways in which he was expert.

When a "bad man" disappeared, and the question of his whereabouts was raised, the people said: "Oh, I suppose he has gone into Ketcham's Hills."

The reputation of the hills was of this character until Frank Murphy, a sheriff of those days, and one of the gamest men who ever "packed a gun," made up his mind to go after Ketcham. First, because he "wanted" him, as the saying went, for they were old enemies; and, again, for the reward that had been offered for him, by the Territory and the United States, "hot or cold," which meant dead or alive. The reward had grown to large proportions by additions made to it by express companies and individuals, who had been injured by Ketcham, and were desirous of his extermination. Seth Parmalee had offered ten thousand dollars to anyone who would bring him Ketcham, and he made no stipulation as to his condition.

Parmalee was one of the biggest cattlemen in the Territory at the time when Ketcham was "doing business" in the Black Hills country. One day, when he was absent from the ranch, it was raided by a gang of rustlers, who had driven off his cattle, murdered his wife and stolen his child, a little girl five years old. Parmalee sold out, and went on the trail of the kidnapers and murderers.

Parmalee knew that the Ketcham gang had committed the crimes. He was a game man, and he made Ketcham dodge him all over the country, until at last they met at Valentine, Nebraska, one day. Parmalee went into a gambling house, always looking for Ketcham, who was there. A member of Ketcham's gang had notified him that Parmalee was in town, and, as his pursuer entered the door, Ketcham shot him full of bullets, and hurried away to his hills. He knew that Parmalee's friends would never rest until they got him.

Parmalee did not die, for, as he told his friends, he could not die until he saw Ketcham dead and his daughter restored to her father.

He was terribly wounded, and it seemed impossible that he should live. But he did, although he was so badly crippled that he could never again go on the trail. He spent a great amount of money hiring experienced Western men to look for his daughter, now that he could not do so himself.

When Frank Murphy determined to go after Ketcham, he was warned that the desperado was "laying for him," and was eager for him to come into the hills, for he had vowed that, if the sheriff did enter them, he would not go out alive. He even sent out his defiance to Murphy.

Murphy gathered about him a little band of about a dozen of the most desperate gun fighters in the Black Hills, some of whom had pasts into which no one inquired too closely. But they were all devoted to Murphy, who had done them favors that could not be forgotten.

With his men, Murphy boldly entered the hills, and took the trail of his old enemy.

Murphy found Ketcham in a pocket-like valley in the hills, completely fortified in a big log cabin. After a week of scouting, Murphy's men discovered that Ketcham had about twenty men with him, some of them desperadoes who were badly wanted, "hot or cold," and for whom there were rewards out aggregating fifty thousand dollars. This was too good to let slip, no matter how great the risk. Each of Murphy's men pitted his

life against his share of the whole amount of the rewards. They were like soldiers of fortune.

Ketcham knew every move made by the Murphy men, for his system of scouting was quite as good as that of Murphy.

Then began a battle of wits and force. Ketcham's stronghold was practically impregnable, so far as Murphy was concerned. It would have taken a regiment of United States troops, armed with mountain cannon, to have dislodged him.

Murphy learned, through his scouts, that in the cabin with Ketcham and his band of desperate men were a woman and a child. The woman he could account for—she was Ketcham's wife. But the child?

Ketcham had only one child, a son, who was about fourteen years old, and a chip off the old block, as daring and unscrupulous as his father. Ketcham was about fifty years old, and his wife was not much younger. Who was the little girl? Of course, it might have been a foster child, picked up in the settlements, for such things were not uncommon. Children left without parents were never neglected by the people of the West, but were adopted by whoever found them, and taken into families and treated the same as the other children. But Murphy knew that Ketcham was not of that sort. He had to move too quickly when he was pursued to be bothered with a family which he was not legally bound to support, and, while he would not leave an orphan whom he found in the course of his raids to starve, he did not seek further incumbrances than his wife and son.

Murphy concluded that the child was Seth Parmalee's little daughter, and this spurred him the harder, for everyone in the Black Hills was in thorough sympathy with Parmalee.

After weeks of waiting and scouting, Murphy and his men succeeded in capturing or killing about half of Ketcham's gang.

It was a case of starve out the defenders of the cabin, but it seemed as if they could not make the remaining members of the gang surrender. Murphy supposed, of course, that they had built their cabin over a spring of water, but he did not know how they were able to secure sufficient food to withstand the siege to which they had been subjected.

One day two of Murphy's men brought in a youth, whom they had surprised gathering wood at the mouth of a cave far from the Ketcham cabin. At first the young fellow was sulky, and would not talk, but Murphy's friendly manner and the companionship of the other men thawed him out, so that he finally told them that the cave at which he had been captured led directly into Ketcham's cabin.

The cavern had many passages, and one not familiar with its windings might easily get lost among them, and be killed by the desperadoes. He finally agreed to direct Murphy and his men to the right passage. Murphy did not know but what the lad would betray him, but the leader showed his gameness when he concluded to take the chance.

The Ketcham party were, therefore, astonished that afternoon to see Murphy and half a dozen of his men suddenly leap through the opening left in the floor of their hut for the passage into the cave. Ketcham and some of his men were playing cards at the far end of the room when their enemies entered. The woman immediately grasped the child in her arms and fled out of the door, Murphy's guards, posted outside, letting her escape in their eager watching for a rush of the gang.

Inside the cabin one of the most desperate fights in Western history was taking place. Murphy killed Ketcham at the first fusillade. But Ketcham's son shot Murphy five times in as many seconds.

When the pistol battle within the cabin was over, it was found that the leaders of the opposing forces were both dead, and the outlaws were huddled in a corner, ready to surrender. But Ketcham's son, the young demon, who had been badly wounded by having his pistol hand shot almost to pieces, had got away.

That was the end of the Ketcham gang, but the memory of it could not be driven from the minds of the old settlers. Parmalee paid the survivors of the raid ten thousand dollars for the head of Ketcham, but he still mourned the loss of his daughter, and retired to Cheyenne to live the rest of his days, in the hope that some day he would find her.

Ted and the boys knew the story of the Ketcham Hills by heart.

As they emerged from the bad land into a clearing, they stopped and looked, with amazement, at the scene before them. They saw a comfortable-looking log cabin, surrounded by a large garden of flowers, a thing so unusual in that part of the country, where the land was given over to pastures. But, what caused them to stop and hold themselves ready to spring forward at a word, was the fact that out of the stone chimney at the end of the cabin a great cloud of smoke was pouring, and the air was full of the fumes of whisky.

But the most amazing sight of all was in the flower garden.

There they saw the pretty girl whom they had seen at Sherman City selling bouquets, picking flowers. By her side was an old hag, smoking a corncob pipe with evident gusto, and directing the young girl how to pick the flowers.

"Well, what d'yer think o' thet?" asked Bud Morgan, in a whisper.

"It's the headquarters of the whisky gang," said Ted. "Wait here a minute, till I speak with them."

Ted rode forward, and the other boys withdrew to the shelter of the woods.

The girl and the old woman looked up as Ted approached, and the old woman shoved the girl behind her.

"Git away from here!" shrieked the hag. "What are ye doin' here? This is private prop'ty!"

"I was traveling through the country, and took a short cut through the bad land, which brought me to this place," said Ted. "I saw that you were picking flowers, and thought I should like to buy a bouquet."

The girl was looking at him, with timid eyes. She was as delicate as one of the flowers which she held in her hands, and her face expressed both purity and candor. Evidently she did not recognize Ted.

"We will give him some flowers, grandma," she said.

The old woman grunted, removing her pipe from between her lips, but she did not cease to regard Ted suspiciously.

"Very well, child," she said.

The girl was in the act of picking the flowers, when Ted heard Bud yell, and saw the old cowboy dash across the space that intervened between the bad lands and the house.

In a moment he had arrived at the side of the house, with Clay and Carl immediately behind him.

Bud was off his pony's back like a flash of lightning. He sprang at one of the windows of the house, smashed it in with the butt of his revolver, and wormed his way into the room.

The old woman was screaming at the top of her voice, and the girl met Ted's hasty glance with a look of wild terror in her eyes.

As Ted looked back toward the house, he saw Clay and Carl disappear through the broken window.

At the same time he noticed a movement at the back of the cabin. A man had jumped from one of the windows and was speeding across the clearing toward the woods.

It was "Three Fingers."

Ted took after him as fast as he could run.

CHAPTER VI.

BUD BUYS "AXLE JUICE."

"Three Fingers" ran like a deer, and had the advantage over Ted of at least three hundred yards. But, even at that, Ted was gaining on him so rapidly that, on looking over his shoulder, "Three Fingers" saw his danger, and, pulling his revolver, clipped a shot at Ted from under his arm. It was one of the few times in his life that "Three Fingers'" aim went wrong, for firing under his arm while in retreat was one of his long suits. As it was, the bullet whistled close to Ted's head, but he ducked.

"Great shooting," thought Ted, when he remembered that the thumb and forefinger of the shooter were missing.

Then a thought flashed through Ted's brain that almost brought him to a stop. But he redoubled his exertions, and ran as he never ran before.

"'Three Fingers' is young Jack Ketcham," was his thought.

Ted's thoughts traveled faster than his feet, as he pursued "Three Fingers." After the death of his father, the young desperado had fled to Mexico with his mother. Ted was now recalling all he had heard about him in the past. "Three Fingers" was said to have come into the Black Hills from Texas, over the line from Mexico. Young Ketcham had had his gun hand shot all to pieces in the raid on his father's cabin.

So, after all, the old Ketcham spirit of outlawry was not yet dead in the country!

Ted was more than ever determined to capture "Three Fingers."

The desperado was not nearly so good a runner as Ted, who had gained on him at every jump.

But suddenly "Three Fingers" leaped behind a clump of bushes, and was lost to view.

Ted feared an ambush, and, drawing his revolver, approached the bushes cautiously.

Suddenly he rounded them, ready to shoot and fight. But there was nothing there except the bare ground, shrubs in the distance and the sky overhead. "Three Fingers" had disappeared as if the earth had swallowed him.

Where has he gone? Ted knew, of course, that no supernatural means had been employed in this sudden and mysterious disappearance of "Three Fingers," but he was puzzled. The undergrowth continued about a hundred yards ahead, for the clump of bushes marked the border of a small, natural clearing.

Ted searched the undergrowth, but could find no trace of the man he had been chasing. He stamped the ground over thoroughly for the sound of a cave. There was none. He discovered nothing.

After spending half an hour in this fruitless fashion, he returned to the house in the clearing.

Bud, Carl and Clay were sitting on their ponies, at a little distance from the house, watching it.

"Where are the girl and the old woman?" asked Ted, as he approached them.

"They went inter ther house, an' I reckon they're still thar," answered Bud.

Ted rapped upon the door of the house, and, after repeating it several times without getting any response, opened it and entered.

The place was empty. The old woman and the girl were gone.

Bud and the other boys were loud in their regrets that they had let the old woman smuggle the girl away.

"It's all right, fellows, now that it's done, but we have

missed securing the daughter of Seth Parmalee!" said Ted.

"What!" cried Bud. "Thet thar gal the daughter o' Seth Parmalee? Why, Ted, whar did yer l'arn thet?"

"Reasoned it out," answered Ted. "Young Ketcham and his mother escaped from the cabin at the time of the Murphy raid, taking a little girl. Young Ketcham had his pistol hand shot to pieces. That is our friend 'Three Fingers.' Seth Parmalee's daughter would be about the age of the girl whom we have missed. I may be wrong, but I believe that 'Three Fingers' has come back to the scene of the exploits of his father, and that the old woman is none other than Mrs. Ketcham, and that our flower girl is the child of Seth Parmalee. It all occurred to me in a moment, when 'Three Fingers' fired a shot at me a few moments ago. And now we have missed them."

"Jumpin' sandhills, but I'm sorry!" said Bud, with such a note of regret in his voice that Ted laughed.

"Never mind, old chap," he said. "We'll get them all yet."

"Ef I don' never do nothin' else until ther end, I'll git thet thar 'Three Fingers' an' ther gal!" said Bud.

"Don't worry," said Ted. "We'll get them all before we are done."

The house was an ordinary settler's cabin of two rooms, and, when they had searched it thoroughly, they found nothing that would confirm Ted's suspicion that "Three Fingers" was the son of Ketcham, the terror, and that the girl was the daughter of Seth Parmalee.

Ted had smelled the fumes of whisky as he approached the house the first time, and believed that a still was located in it. But the most diligent search failed to reveal one.

"I reckon yer nose is overtrained fer sich smells," said Bud, laughing at Ted's disgust that he had not found that which he was sure existed.

"It's here," said Ted. "There can be no doubt about it."

Ted and Bud were standing in the main room of the house. They heard a cry, and a loud laugh from Clay, and rushed to the door.

"I in der vell haf fallen!" shouted Carl, as they appeared, "und it schmells like a saloon!"

Carl was spraddled out on the ground, one leg on the earth, the other concealed in it.

The boys hurried to his assistance. His leg had gone through a broken board that covered a sort of cistern in the yard back of the house.

The almost overpowering smell of whisky came from it. It was the source from which "Three Fingers" supplied the country with the contraband liquor.

Ted went back into the house, and searched it thoroughly, but could find nothing that would in any way incriminate "Three Fingers."

Evidently this house was not the principal home of the whisky seller. There was no evidence at all that the stuff was made here.

After destroying the whisky in the cistern, the boys concluded to keep on their way to Sherman City, and try to get some trace of the girl.

If Ted's suspicion that she was the daughter of Seth Parmalee was right, and they could find traces of the girl again, their day's work was not in vain.

But Ted wanted "Three Fingers" quite as badly as Sheriff Murphy did his father in the old days.

He thought of it as he rode along. He had conceived a bitter hatred for this murderer of one of his men, who was keeping this young girl from her father.

He could not believe that this pure, young girl knew what she was doing in selling whisky concealed within the bouquets she had delivered to the men in the town.

As they were riding toward the town, they overtook a covered wagon, from which came the noise of song and laughter.

The flap was down in the back of the wagon, but there were several men inside of it, according to the number of voices the boys heard in discordant song.

Ted looked at Bud, who winked at him, and went through the motions of drinking out of a bottle. As the young rough riders were then in the Indian country, and, being United States deputy marshals, had the right to overhaul and examine any person they suspected of having liquor in their possession, they ranged alongside of the wagon.

At a sign from Ted, Bud rode up to the side of the driver.

"Howdy, pard!" said Bud.

"Howdy!" answered the driver, looking at Bud suspiciously.

Bud looked like an ordinary cowpuncher on his way to town to have a good time. The handkerchief knotted about his throat was pulled rakishly up under one ear, and the brim of his hat had a twist to it that might mean anything that was devilish and reckless.

"Goin' up to town?" asked the driver of the team.

"Well, you know it!" answered Bud, with a wink that might have meant a whole book full of stories of the things that would happen when he got there.

"Gittin' kinder dry out on ther range?" queried the driver, sizing Bud up out of the corner of his eye.

"Dry? Why, pardner, it's so dry out thar we don't none o' us dare light a match, fer fear o' blowin' up ther whole country!"

The driver grinned at Bud's extravagant figure of speech.

"Who's yer friends?" he asked, after a pause.

"Oh, a bunch o' cowpunchers from over at the Rothwell Ranch."

"Say ye wuz dry?" asked the driver, with a sly twinkle of his eye and a jerk of his head back toward the boys.

"Dry ain't no name for it," said Bud. "Why, pardner, dust looks like mud compared to the way I feel inside!"

"Then I reckon I can accommodate ye with a drop o' licker, if yer so disposed," said the driver. "Of course, ye understand how it comes?"

"Sure thing," said Bud, with a wink.

"Ye look like a cowpuncher what hasn't had a drink for some time, an' I don't like to see any such die o' thirst when I have it," said the driver.

"I'm yer game," said Bud, "an' yer can name yer own price. When a cowpuncher gits off'n ther home lot with his pay, he ain't stingy with a friend."

"I know that," said the driver, "an' I ain't like a feller as can't loosen ther cords o' a feller cowpuncher's throat."

"Cut in, then," said Bud. "Conversation thet lasts more than a minute er two always creates a worse thirst in me."

The driver gave a big guffaw, and pulled his team up, with a lot of curses and loud whoas.

Bud had thought he would, perhaps, draw a jug from under the wagon seat. But he wrapped the lines around the brake, and climbed slowly down.

"I reckon yer pals will want a drink, too?" he said.

Bud nodded, and the driver reached into the wagon and brought out a lot of tin cups.

As he did so, a man thrust a touseled head from behind the wagon flap, and shouted:

"Say, old boy, fill 'em up all round!" At the same time he pushed a lot of tin cups out of the wagon.

"All right," said the driver, taking them from him.

Bud nodded to the driver to wait on the party in the wagon first.

So far, the fellow had made no motion to produce a jug, or other receptacle of the liquor he proposed to dispense, and the boys gathered around him, watching him.

They knew that the means by which the "bootleggers" deceived the officers were many and past finding out.

They were surprised, therefore, when the driver went to the hind wheel of the wagon on the off side, and began to screw the nut off the axle.

Several tough-looking men were hanging out of the back of the wagon, watching him, and urging him, with oaths, to hurry.

As soon as the axle was off, a stream of brown fluid began to run from the axle into the cups the driver held beneath it.

As he passed the cups up to the men in the wagon, each threw half a dollar to the ground.

Whisky was "four bits" a drink.

"Give us two dollars' worth o' your axle juice, pardner," said Bud.

CHAPTER VII.

A RUNAWAY FIGHT.

The driver grinned at Bud's name for his goods, but filled four of the tin cups with the stuff. Bud threw two silver dollars on the ground, which the driver picked up and put in his pocket.

This was the signal for business.

The fellow had sold whisky.

"Whar's yer license, pardner?" asked Bud.

The driver looked up at him swiftly, and saw the mouth of a forty-four Colt smiling into his eyes.

The boys all threw their cups of whisky to the ground.

Two of the men in the wagon leaped out over the front seat and ran like jack rabbits across the prairie.

They all knew, the moment Bud spoke, that they had been held up by United States deputy marshals, and that they had fallen easily into a trap. Those who were not guilty of selling the whisky were likely to be held as witnesses, and, if they could not give heavy bonds, would be liable to lie in jail until brought up for trial.

This was what had caused the two fellows to leap over the seat and try to escape.

The boys had dismounted when the driver of the wagon began to decant the whisky from the axle of the wagon, as that was the most natural way in which to receive it.

As the two fellows broke away from the wagon, Ted nodded to Carl and Clay, and they sprinted after the fugitives.

"Well, you——" The driver began to rip out an epithet at Bud.

"Keep it in, pardner, er you'll hev ter swaller it whole, if it comes out! I never wuz no hand ter take bad names from a stranger," said Bud.

"I thought you wuz on the square," said the crestfallen driver of the whisky-peddling wagon.

"Yer right I'm on ther square," said Bud. "If you don't believe it, I'll show yer my commission; an' ef thet don't satisfy yer, I'll back it up with this little, ole lady o' mine, what I call 'Lucy,' because she's so loosey erbout ther j'ints she's lierble ter go off at ther slightest pressure o' my finger. Say, podner, ef yer knew how awful narvous an' excitable this yere forefinger o' mine wuz, yer wouldn't look at me like thet, an' yer wouldn't say none o' them sassy things what's in yer mind. Besides which, ye'd stay yer right hand from reachin' fer yer gun. 'Lucy's' got ther best o' yer, ez ye kin see, so act up like a little gentleman, an' climb onter ther seat o' ther wagon."

The men inside the wagon paused, with the cups of whisky raised to their lips, at this unexpected interruption. They were a hard lot, and every one of them was a "bootlegger," or a patron of the whisky makers, and in thorough sympathy with them. There was fight in the expression of every face, and they were reaching for

their revolvers, when they were interrupted by the cool voice of Ted Strong, who said:

"Stop it!"

Ted was holding them down with a brace of revolvers, while Bud drove the reluctant driver onto his seat, with the aid of the persuasive eloquence of his "Lucy."

But the men in the wagon did not relish being held up in this manner. They were not used to such treatment. Holding up people at the point of the pistol was their own profession.

They had been caught unawares, and, as they looked into Ted's guns, their lips trembled, and did not cover the rims of the tin cups of whisky, which slopped over in their shaking hands.

But they were never beaten until they were dead. That was the sort of stuff from which these Western men were made of, good or bad.

Ted had the "dead wood" on them, but there was the chance that it might be the other way soon.

They were creeping their hands around toward their holsters. The "bootlegger" saw that he was caught with the goods. "Steady, boys!" said Ted. "The first man who makes a move toward his belt gets a Colt's pill!"

In the meantime, the whisky was running out of the wagon axle and making a puddle on the ground.

This was one of the most surprising and ingenious schemes for introducing whisky into the country that Ted could conceive. It was pure accident, and Bud's ingenuity, that had discovered it.

The plan of the "bootlegger" was now very apparent. The axle of the wagon was very much larger than usual, and was made of strong steel. It had almost the capacity of a small keg. It was tapped by a nut that had nothing to do with that which held on the wheel. When this was turned, it acted as a spigot, and the whisky poured forth.

Bud had driven the driver to his seat, and climbed in after him.

Ted drove the men in the wagon back into it, and climbed in with the rest.

"Now, where shall we go?" asked Bud.

"Into Sherman City," answered Ted, shortly. "We'll get these fellows into jail the first thing."

Some of the men in the wagon began to plead, saying that they had merely been picked up on the road, and that they were not "bootleggers," and had nothing whatever to do with the whisky business.

"All right," said Ted. "Perhaps you are innocent, but you have been caught in mighty bad company, and you can explain your situation in court."

He had no sooner spoken than there was something doing in the wagon.

The two men nearest him sprang at him. At the same time the driver, who had been forced onto the seat, turned upon Bud and struck him a blow on the side of the head with a wrench which he had picked up as he climbed upon the seat.

"Go after them!" shouted the "bootlegger."

Bud was stunned for a moment, but the blow had roused in him all the rage of which his usually humorous and good-natured disposition was capable. He grasped the "bootlegger" by the throat with his right hand and swung a blow at his jaw with his big left fist, which was as large as a small ham and as hard as the flint in Ketcham's Hills.

"Yer blame rum merchant, take thet!" shouted Bud. "An', so's yer won't fergit me, here's another from ther same place, an' there's plenty more whar thet come from!"

The "bootlegger's" head rocked back from the blows, but he was game, or he would not have been in the business in which he was engaged. When he had recovered somewhat, he leaped upon Bud, and they fought like tigers, the one to throw the intruder from the wagon, the other to subdue the "bootlegger."

But Bud had the best of it from the start, because he was as strong as a young steer, while the "bootlegger" was worn out with whisky drinking. Besides, Bud had the vigor which comes from a life in the saddle, while the other had spent a good deal of his time on the seat of a wagon.

And this is what told eventually, for Bud, after a few more jolting blows from his hamlike fist, settled the driver, who began to beg for mercy, after Bud had bent him over the back of the seat.

"Say, feller, yer as tough ez a rubber mat!" said Bud. "Hev I got ter knock yer head plumb off before yer get ernough?"

The "bootlegger" was in a bad way, and a few more of Bud's sledge-hammer blows would have put him in the hospital for a month, had not the cowboy mercifully hearkened to his pleadings.

"Git down off the wagon an' meet me standin' fair, with a gun, an' I'll give you a fight!" said he; "but your fist is too heavy for me!"

"Sure thing," said Bud. "I reckon thar ain't a butcher this side o' Omaha what has a fist thet weighs more as mine. I'm right proud o' thet bunch o' knuckles, pardner, an' you ain't ther fust dog-gone thief what's felt it! But, so's ye've got plenty o' it, I'm jest goin' ter tie yer up, so thet yer won't make no more trouble fer me."

Bud pulled a rope out from the bottom of the wagon. As he was reaching for it, the "bootlegger" made a motion to jump out.

Bud saw the move from the corner of his eye, and punched the fellow once more. That was the settler, for he laid back, with a grunt, all the fight taken out of him.

With a few swift movements, Bud tied him to the back

of the seat, after binding his hands, so that he could not release himself.

He had to hurry, for the team had been taking care of itself, and, becoming frightened at the tumult behind it, was running away, having dragged the reins loose from the brake, where the "bootlegger" had tied them. This also released the brake. Feeling themselves free, the horses broke into a gallop, and were swinging the wagon along at a furious pace.

The only way to stop them was to secure the lines, which were dragging along on the ground. Bud set the brake, which did not serve in any way to impede the progress of the wagon, but only smoked with the friction.

He then dropped off the footboard onto the wagon tongue, and began to work his way cautiously toward the heads of the horses, which, feeling the full enjoyment of freedom, were running away as furiously as if they really had something to run away about.

Meanwhile, Ted was having the greatest battle of his existence in the back part of the wagon.

The incidents which have been told occurred in a few moments. But during the time it takes to tell them Ted had put one of the men in the wagon on his back, and was battling with three others.

The men who had leaped upon him when he first climbed into the wagon had met with a warmer reception than they looked for.

Evidently, they took Ted for a boy, and, as they were in force, believed they would find him an easy victim.

Ted had slipped one of his revolvers into its holster, but kept the other in his hand for emergencies.

He did not want to use it unless he was compelled to. And he thought that the fellows in the wagon would go along quietly, now that they knew that they were under arrest, and could not get away.

He was not altogether unprepared, therefore, when the man nearest him threw the contents of his cup into his face and leaped upon him.

The whisky blinded and almost strangled him, but he had sufficient presence of mind to bring his revolver down hard and quickly.

It caught his assailant on the temple, and, as he sprang backward, Ted hit him a heavy blow with his fist, which, upsetting the fellow's balance, knocked him over the tailboard of the wagon.

Now the other fellows jumped for Ted. There was scarce room for him to turn, but he managed to wriggle his way toward the front of the wagon—for he was afraid they would throw him out, also, if they got the best of him.

As the next came to him, Ted hit him in the chin with his knee. He fell over, with a groan, and lay still. The next to come to the attack was a husky, young chap Ted swung his right arm, as the fellow sprang across the wagon, and let him have his fist between the eyes. That finished him.

As the other came on, he ran into the barrel of Ted's revolver.

"Back up!" shouted Ted. "This for you, if you come an inch further!"

The command was obeyed.

Out of the corner of his eye, Ted had seen Bud's struggle with the driver, and his victory, which terminated in the former's favor, and had seen the old cowpuncher climb out along the wagon pole.

Now he heard a cry. Bud had been flung off. It was up to Ted to try to stop the runaway team, and at the same time control the wagonload of desperate men, any one of whom would have been glad of the chance to murder him.

"I'm going out to get the reins," he said. "If any man in the bunch moves, I'll kill him! You know me!"

CHAPTER VIII.

TED TAKES TO THE HILLS.

The wagon was lurching from side to side as it was being dragged swiftly by the crazy horses, and the pole along which Ted was creeping was jerking up and down and sideways. No wonder Bud had been thrown off it.

But, by the utmost care, Ted managed to secure the lines and draw them in. He then crawled back to the wagon and climbed up to the seat.

The men inside had remained as he left them. One was nursing a sore jaw, while another had been so completely bluffed that he made no move to get away.

Holding the lines in one hand and his revolver in the other, Ted drove into town with all his prisoners, and soon had them in jail.

Just before dark Clay and Carl came into town with the two men they had pursued and caught. Bud came limping in later on. His fall from the wagon had given him a few bruises, but otherwise he was not hurt. A night's rest would put him all right again.

"Now, thet looks ter me like a pretty good haul," said Bud. "Six o' ther gang in one bunch seems ter me ter be as easy as shootin' fish in a bar'l with a club."

"Yes, it's pretty good," answered Ted, "but we lost the head and moving spirit of the gang. I'll never rest until I have got 'Three Fingers.' The first thing in the morning I'm going on his trail, and I'll not rest until I find him. If I don't bring him out of the hills, I'll stay there!"

"You're not going in after him alone, are you?" asked Clay Whipple.

"That's what I'm going to do," answered Ted.

"But that's plumb foolishness, Ted," said Clay, anxiously.

"Better let me go along, Ted," said Bud. "I may be a

little slow in some things, but I can shore pack a gun an' foller a trail."

"I know that, and I'd like to take you all; but this is a lone trail," said Ted. "He's gone into the hills alone, and, if I find him, I can handle him, all right, while it would be like going in with banners and a band of music if we all went trailing through those hills. It might defeat the very purpose we have in view."

"Well, have your own way," said Clay.

"If yer don't come out in a day er two, you'll see little Buddie in thar, a-campin' on yer trail," said Bud. "I ain't goin' ter hev yer runnin' no sech risks ez thet."

"Oh, that will be all right," laughed Ted. "I've been in the woods alone before, and I guess I can find my way about."

"I ain't denyin' it," said Bud, "but ye've got a bad citizen, who's mighty handy with his gun, ter deal with. Look out fer him."

"I will certainly do that," answered Ted. "But let us get to bed now, for we must be up early in the morning."

They went to the hotel, and put up for the night, leaving word in the office to be called at daylight.

It was still dark when Ted and his companions left the town and went to the house from which "Three Fingers" had escaped.

When they came within sight of it, they saw smoke issuing from the chimney. Some one was at home. Could it be that "Three Fingers" himself had returned, for some purpose or other?

To guard against ambush, Ted left the boys behind, and crawled toward the house. Lying in the long grass beside the trail, he watched it closely for an hour, but saw nothing that would indicate that anyone was within, except the thin thread of smoke that arose from the stone chimney.

He wondered if the old woman had returned with the girl. If so, he was in luck, for he determined not to lose the girl this time.

Just as day was breaking, Ted saw the door open a few inches, and a head cautiously appear.

It was the old woman, "Three Fingers'" mother.

She looked furtively in all directions for several minutes. Once she looked fixedly at the spot where Ted was lying on the ground, concealed behind a small clump of grass. He thought sure she had discovered him, but her eyes strayed away, and, thinking there were no intruders about, she opened the door and came out.

She walked around the house, examining the premises carefully, and went back into the house again.

Ted crept nearer, until he could see through the window.

So far as he could see, the old woman was alone in the house.

He got no glimpse of the girl. Moving softly around the house, he managed to look through every window. The girl was not there.

What had become of her? Where had the old hag concealed her? These were questions he must have answered before he could rest.

That the old woman had taken her away was certain.

As he was looking into the house, he saw the old woman get a couple of buckets from a bench, and tie a rope to the handle of one. She lifted a trapdoor in the floor, and lowered the bucket into it. Presently she drew it up, and emptied its contents into the other bucket. She lowered the bucket once more, and again drew it up.

Then she untied the rope, and, picking up the buckets, started to leave the house.

Ted let her proceed down the path toward the woods, following her softly. Suddenly he made a dash for her. He wanted to know what the buckets contained.

The old woman had ears as sharp as those of a fox, for, when he was still several yards away, she turned her head swiftly, uttered a shrill scream, and dropped the buckets to the ground.

Ted ran to her side. Whatever had been in them had sunk into the dry earth, leaving only a big, wet spot in the soil.

But, if he did not have the evidence of sight, he had that of smell, for the odor of whisky filled the air. The old hag laughed shrilly as Ted sniffed the air above the place where she had destroyed the evidence against herself.

"Ha! ha!" she cackled. "Prove it! Prove it!"

"Whisky!" said Ted. "No need to prove it. The smell of it is surely strong enough."

"Gather up the smell and take it into court!" she shrieked. "Ah, ye're a smart young cub, but the old woman is twice as smart as you! I was old when you were born, an' don't ye think I've learned no tricks in my time? Now, you git away from this place! You have no business here! If my son was here, he'd drive ye away, with yer spyin' around!"

"I wish he was here," said Ted, quietly. "There is no person I would sooner meet."

"When ye meet him, ye'll meet sorrow!" shrieked the old woman.

"What have you done with the girl who was here yesterday?"

"Ha! ha! Ho! ho!" laughed the old crone. "That you'll never know! What business is it of yours, I'd like to know? She's gone, and you'll never see her again! What do you want with her?"

"I'll find her yet," said Ted, "and send her to her father. And you will be lucky if you do not go to the penitentiary."

When Ted said this, the old woman fairly shrieked, in her rage.

"How dare you talk to me of prison, you young ras-

cal?" she cried. "If my old man were alive, as was murdered by enemies of the law, you wouldn't talk to me like that! If my son was not in the hills, you wouldn't be spying on a poor, old woman! But you'll never find the girl! You'll never find the girl!"

"I believe you've made away with her," said Ted, looking the old woman squarely in the eyes.

He believed nothing of the sort, but he hoped to anger her so that she would flare up, under an accusation, and tell where the girl was hidden.

He was right in his surmise. The accusation made her furious.

"I have not! I have not!" she cried, running up to him and shaking her clawlike fingers in his face. "I love her as if she were my own flesh and blood!"

"Then I was right; she is not yours," said Ted, tauntingly. "She is the daughter of Seth Parmalee, who was stolen by your husband years ago!"

"Prove it!" she cried, again. "I dare you to prove it!"

"I'll prove it, all right, when I find her," said Ted, coolly.

"That you never will, even if you hunt the hills forever!" screamed the old woman.

"So she's in the hills, then?" said Ted. "Much obliged for telling me."

The hag saw that she had given her secret away, and grew angrier than ever.

"I didn't say so!" she cried; "but, hunt as you will, you'll never find her!"

Ted laughed, and walked away, leaving her screaming epithets after him.

He went back to where the boys were hidden, and, telling them to watch the house, and follow the old woman, should she leave it, bade them "Good-by," and struck into the hills, in his search for the girl and "Three Fingers."

He knew in a general sort of way the direction in which lay Ketcham's Hole, as the pocket-like valley in which the old Ketcham cabin stood was called, and he made up his mind that "Three Fingers" would be most likely to go there.

When he got into the mountainous region, back from the settlements, he found the country so rough as to be impassable for a horse in most places, and decided to turn his animal in at the first corral he came to. That evening he saw in a little valley the cabin of a woodsman, where he was received civilly, and permission given him to leave his pony for a few days.

Here he learned that "Three Fingers" had been seen in the neighborhood, making his way into the heart of the hills.

The timber cutter did not know him, but, from the description he gave, Ted had no doubt the fellow was the man the young rough rider was pursuing.

"Reckon you'd better stay for the night," said the woodsman, hospitably. But Ted took a look at the crowded cabin, in which dogs and children rolled together on the floor, and refused the kindly meant invitation. He asked if there was a store anywhere in the neighborhood, and learned that there was a settlement several miles further on in the mountains, where he could supply himself with a few necessaries for his camp.

Leaving the road at the timber cutter's cabin, he struck out across the hills, and during the early part of the evening came to the store.

It was at the junction of two rough trails that led away into the hills. Around the door sat a few men, chewing tobacco and discussing politics. As Ted came up, they made way for him, but stopped talking, and regarded him with backwoods suspicion.

Ted understood why that was. A great deal of moonshining, or the making of illicit whisky, was carried on everywhere in the mountains. No doubt some of these very men were moonshiners, and made whisky for "Three Fingers" to sell.

Ted bought enough food to carry him for two or three days, a line and some hooks, and, leaving the store, made his way to a beautiful, mountain stream, where he took a swim and made a rude shelter of branches for his camp. Ted could make camp anywhere where there was food and water, and made himself very comfortable.

After he had eaten a frugal supper of trout fried with bacon he had bought at the store, he left camp, to stroll along the wood road that followed the stream.

It was a beautiful night, with the moon shining in a perfectly clear sky.

CHAPTER IX.

DOWN THE CHIMNEY TREE.

As Ted walked along, watching the moon shining on the water, he saw, far down the creek, the light from a camp fire shining through the trees, and struck out toward it.

He thought it might prove to be the camp of some one

friendlier than the mountaineers, with whom he could spend the night.

Suddenly he became aware that he was being followed. He heard and saw nothing, but his plainsman's sense told him that he was in danger.

He looked about carefully, and imagined he saw a pair of eyes glaring at him from the cover of the underbrush. But, when he walked resolutely toward the place and parted the bushes, he saw nothing to arouse his suspicions.

But, as a precaution, he took his revolver from its holster at his belt and stuck it into the front of his trousers, letting his vest cover it, for he wore no coat, having started out without one, believing it would be an incumbrance. To further protect himself, should he be attacked, he took out his large claspknife and opened it. It would be a handier weapon at close quarters than a revolver.

He stopped, with a jerk. His blood almost froze in his veins! A man dashed across the road in front of him, the lower part of his face concealed beneath a black cloth, which was tied over his nose.

As he rushed past, he gave the most unearthly and blood-curdling yell Ted had ever heard.

It was this that caused his heart to stop beating for an instant.

Then Ted remembered the stories he had heard of the wild man of Ketcham's Hills, who had been hunted many times by bands of cowboys and other adventurous souls, who desired to see for themselves who the wild man might be.

In the past two or three years solitary hunters, who had gone into Ketcham's Hills, had sometimes failed to come back, and, when their friends set out to find them, they generally came upon a pile of bones, picked clean by the vultures. In every case they found beside the bones a notched stick. At first no significance was attached to the coincidence, but, after a while, it was seen to be a grewsome token left purposely by the murderer. The bodies of those found before they were destroyed bore evidence that the victims had been strangled.

After a time the crimes were attributed to the wild man, and, although he had often been sought, none could run him to his lair.

The shock of seeing the wild man soon passed, and Ted braced himself for what might come. He jumped into the woods, and looked around for signs of the canny being. He thought he heard a sound, as of some one moving, further on, and was walking in that direction, when he suddenly felt himself being lifted from the ground by his neck.

He had felt nothing until he was suddenly pulled up by a rope. It was fortunate that he had taken the precaution to carry his knife in his hand. If he had not the presence of mind to use it quickly, he would have been strangled to death.

But, as he felt the first tug on the rope, he gave it a slash with his knife.

He dropped to the ground, unhurt.

As soon as he recovered from his astonishment at this unprovoked attempt on his life, he looked up into a tree, and saw the rope, which was made of hair, rapidly disappearing among the boughs.

With a spring, he reached the lower limbs, and drew himself up.

The tree was very large, and its branches spread over a wide area and interlocked with those of other trees growing near at hand.

He could hear the other man climbing hastily into its top, and followed as fast as he could, with his knife between his teeth. He would take no more chances with his would-be murderer.

But, when he had climbed into the tree top, no one was there.

He searched each branch to its end. The wild man, if it was he who had noosed him, had escaped, probably along a branch and into another tree.

As Ted was descending, he came to a hole in a big boll, or knot, on one side of the tree, and noted that it was warm, and smelled of smoke. The tree, then, was probably hollow, and a fire had recently been built among its roots. Perhaps the man he sought had gone down inside of it, and was there even now!

But when he got to the ground, and made a thorough examination of the base of the tree, there was no opening, and no traces of a fire.

This puzzled Ted, who was leaning against the bark, thinking of his strange adventure, when he heard a noise beneath him, as if it came from the depths of the cave.

He suspected that there was a cave beneath his feet.

Here, evidently, was the secret of the hollow tree. He searched around until he found a club, with which to beat upon the tree. It gave forth a hollow sound. He decided to investigate still further.

But there was no use continuing his investigations that night. The uncertain light of the moon prevented him from seeing his way clear.

He left the tree, reluctantly, for he felt that he was on the verge of a discovery that might be most important.

After marking the tree carefully, and blazing his way by bending the twigs of the bushes as he passed, so that he could easily find it again, he took the road again, and struck off in the directoin of the camp fire he had seen through the trees by the side of the stream. When he got within hailing distance of it, he was halted by a stern voice by the roadside, calling on him to stop.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" said the voice.

"I am a camper, alone; saw the fire, and thought I might meet friends," answered Ted.

He was not a little disgusted at the cool reception he met, when he had looked for a welcome, as was the fashion in Western camps. If the campers were honest folk, he could soon démonstrate that he was as honest as they. He did not like being held up at the edge of a camp.

"Well, if you are all right, why, then, you're all right," said the voice, quietly. He could not see the face of the man who had stopped him. All he could see was a grim figure standing in the shadow of the bushes, with a very business-like Winchester pointing toward his head.

"If you prove a friend, all right," said the man. "But, if you are not, you'd better have stayed on the other side of the mountains."

Ted thought he recognized the voice, but could not take any hazardous chances now. The voice was that of Mr. Harris, owner of the "Starlight" Ranch, over on the Big Water. He had only met the "Starlight" man once, but at that time Ted had fancied him, on account of his frank and candid manner.

"My name is Ted Strong," said the boy, looking the man straight in the face. "I believe that I was at your wedding out at Fort Riley, several years ago."

"Why, sure!" said the man. "I am Harris, all right, and you're the young fellow who organized the young rough riders. I was at your Wild West Show, and it was bully. Come right into camp; the boys will be glad to see you."

Mr. Harris conducted Ted into the camp, and introduced him to the party. It was composed of a dozen or so big cattlemen from the Big Water cow country and a couple of army officers, out on a hunting trip. They were after mountain lions and bobcats, and had a swell camp. They asked Ted to stop all night, and began to question him, in the most diplomatic manner, as to the business that had brought him into the hills.

Of course, Ted had confidence in men of this sort, although he had never met any of them before, and he told them of the task the young rough riders had undertaken in putting the lid on the liquor business of the country. He told them, also, of the murder of his foreman by "Three Fingers," and of his search for the desperado, which had brought him into the hills.

"You want to be mighty careful of this 'Three Fingers,'" said Mr. Harris, "and not let him get the 'drop' on you. We had trouble with this same fellow over at 'Starlight,' and we had to organize a little rope party before we could get rid of him. He's a bad citizen."

"I know it," said Ted, "and I am going loaded for him."

Ted was given a pair of blankets, and, when bedtime came, he rolled into them with the rest.

It was just getting light when the party was called, and some went out to hunt and others to fish before breakfast.

The air was cold and raw before the sun came out to put a little warmth into it and dispel the early fog that filled the valley.

As everyone, except the cook, had left the camp on their various quests, Ted found his way back to the tree which he had climbed the night before.

He drew himself up on a branch. He could now see his way readily from limb to limb.

When he got near the top, which was effectually concealed from the ground by an overhanging canopy of leaves, he saw that the tree was hollow. But the thing that caused him to gasp in wonder was the fact that it was lined with a casing of metal, which converted it into a kind of chimney, such as one would expect to find coming from a factory.

The inside of the metal casing was lined with the soot of many fires. Here was a most ingenious contrivance for the concealment of a whisky still, and one that would defy the most observing revenue officers.

What lay at the bottom of the smokestack? It was his business to find out without delay. Ted looked into the mouth of the chimney, but could see no way of getting inside.

He climbed out of the tree, and made a survey of the surrounding country for an opening indicating a cave in the earth. What was at the bottom of that smokestack he intended to find out. But he discovered nothing that looked like an entrance to a natural cave or artificial excavation. So he went back to the tree and climbed into it.

He looked down the smokestack, and calculated the distance to the bottom. He calculated that he could enter the unknown passage by sliding feet foremost. He would take a chance on getting out again, though he had always found that it was harder to get into places than to get out.

When he let go at the top, he went sliding to the bottom in a hurry. As he landed on his feet, he doubled up like a ball from the force of the concussion. Before he could rise to his feet, a heavy body fell upon him, knocking him almost senseless, and he heard the horrible laugh of the night before. The wild man had followed him down the pipe.

Ted tried to struggle to his feet, but the wild man was sitting astride of him, binding his arms and legs. In a moment he was trussed like a chicken, with his elbows crooked around a stick that was passed beneath his knees.

The wild man looked down at him, laughing quietly.

And the wild man was none other than "Three Fingers."

CHAPTER X.

TED A PRISONER IN THE OLD "STILL."

Ted looked at "Three Fingers" inquiringly. He saw a young fellow, with greenish-gray eyes, in which was the wickedest look he had ever seen in man, and, withal, Ketcham was not so bad-looking. He had a tall, straight, athletic figure, and flashing, black eyes. But his mouth was sneering and cruel, even when he seemed in good humor. It was when aroused and angry that "Three Fingers" looked the perfect devil.

He had been born with a mania for murder.

Ted, remembering his own narrow escape from the noose only a few hours ago, looked at "Three Fingers" with a sort of fascination. Here, then, was the supposed wild man who was responsible for the deaths of so many lone hunters in the hills.

Ted remembered having heard that almost all the men who had been murdered in this manner had belonged to Murphy's band of intrepid fellows who had gone after the elder Ketcham, or who were friends of his. This was the solution of the wild man's mania for killing. Young Ketcham had been avenging his father's death, and, that done, was now righting his own fancied wrongs, beginning with Ted Strong, who had been the first to cause him to flee from the settlements to the hills, and who had vowed to destroy him and his illicit trade.

Who can say what thoughts were passing through the mind of "Three Fingers" as he and Ted sat looking straight into the eyes of one another, in the cave beneath the chimney tree?

Each looked the other steadily in the eye.

"Well?" said "Three Fingers," with a laugh and a sneer, drawling the word with an intonation of inquiry.

Ted made no reply, but continued to look his enemy in the eye. He was searching for the weak point in the nature of "Three Fingers." If he could find this, and play upon it, he stood a chance to escape.

It seemed to anger the scoundrel that Ted did not show any signs of fear.

"You're trapped at last, you fool! Didn't you know any better than to follow a man to his own burrow?" asked "Three Fingers."

"It was done once before, and the animals in the burrow were drawn out, all right!" said Ted, coolly.

"Three Fingers" snarled at this. The capture of most of the Ketcham gang and the killing of the others, including the leader, was, naturally, a sore subject with him.

"Yes, by Heaven, but by better men than you!" he said.

"Oh, I don't know," said Ted, slowly. "You never know how good a man is until you go up against his game."

"Sure; and I'm a better man than you, for I have you!" laughed the fellow.

"True; but that is not saying that you will have me here always," said Ted.

"Why, you fool, I could kill you right now, and no one would be the wiser!" said "Three Fingers." "But I have something better in store for you than that. I propose to seal you up in here, and go away and leave you."

"Pleasant prospect," said Ted, smiling.

"You will think so after you have been here a few days, and get hungrier and thirstier, and then go crazy from the agony of it, and die like a rat in a stopped hole," laughed "Three Fingers."

"You have a brilliant imagination for horrors," said Ted, laughing, also.

"You're putting up a good bluff," said "Three Fingers." "But it don't go with me. I know your kind. As soon as I am out of here, you'll be whining like a sick puppy."

"Don't you believe it!" laughed Ted. "This isn't the worst fix I've been in, by a whole lot."

"Well, I'll drop in on you in a week or so," said "Three Fingers," looking up at the chimney, with a grin at his joke.

"Oh, don't bother to do that," said Ted. "I'll call on you before that."

"Well, you pup, you've got your nerve with you!" said "Three Fingers," with something like admiration in his voice.

"Ay, and plenty of it," said Ted; "and I'll live on it till we meet again."

"Three Fingers" stooped over Ted, to examine his bonds, and, when he had finished, he slapped Ted's face with his open hand, to show his contempt.

Ted did not wince, although the blow struck deeper than "Three Fingers" intended.

"I thought you were a fellow of some nerve, and at least a grain of courage," said Ted, in a low, even voice. "But I see you are like all the rest of these bluffing cowards. Your father would not have done that. At least, he was a brave man."

"Three Fingers" sprang back, with a cry of rage. The moment the blow was delivered he saw that he had made a mistake, and that Ted was not the ordinary enemy that a man in his kind of life is compelled to meet. He would have withdrawn it, but it was too late.

He approached Ted again, with his hand uplifted to strike, in a very excess of rage. Ted looked up at him, and laughed in his face.

"Three Fingers," with a growl of rage, strode down the narrow passage, and was lost to view around the corner.

Ted now looked about him. He found that he was in a small, square, cavelike room. On one side were several large kettles, an old fireplace and some worms—that is, spiral metal tubes. He saw at once, of course, that he was in a still, or distillery, where whisky had been made.

It was a most ingenious place for the secret distilling of whisky. The hollow, metal-lined tree carried away the smoke and the fumes of the work, and the cleverest secret service man in the employ of the government would have been possessed of a sixth sense to have discovered it.

Evidently, it had not been in operation for some time.

How to free himself was the subject of Ted's most earnest speculations now.

He worked at the ropes that bound him, and soon saw that they were so ingeniously tied that, the harder he struggled, the tighter drew the knots. The stick in the crooks of his knees and elbows was tied in such a manner that when he tried to move about he tumbled over and rolled around like a trussed chicken.

It seemed impossible for him to break the bonds, for the more he tried, the more he increased his difficulties.

While he was working courageously—for Ted had that particular characteristic that spells success nine times out of ten perseverance—he heard a crash, as of a door closing, at a little distance, and then a soft rustle, followed by an exclamation behind him.

He turned his head, to see the young girl whom he had first seen selling flowers in front of the hotel in Sherman City.

Ted smiled, as he looked at her, but the girl's face was decidedly unfriendly. For several moments neither spoke.

"I wish you'd help me untie these cords," said Ted, in a winning tone. But the girl shook her head, without replying.

"I think you'll find me a pretty good friend, if you'll help me out of this," said Ted.

"No," said the girl. "You are the boy who has been trying to injure my brother Jack, and the Ketchams never forget an injury." She spoke as one who had learned a lesson by heart.

"But you are not a Ketcham," said Ted, eagerly. "Suppose I should be able to tell you who you really are, and take you to your father?"

"My father is dead; he was killed by the Indians long years ago, and I was rescued by old Jack Ketcham, and was brought up by him, and I am a Ketcham."

"But you are not," said Ted. "What is your name?"

"Isobel Ketcham," answered the girl.

Ted was certain that the girl was the daughter of Seth Parmalee, whose daughter's name was Isobel. This was about all the little girl remembered about herself when she was taken from her home, and Ketcham had manu-

learned the story of the death of her father by the Indians to satisfy her childish curiosity.

"So Jack has caught you and tied you up?" she said, smiling. "Jack is very strong, and can do anything he likes. He has a bad temper, too, and his arm no one can get away from, and he beats one very hard."

"What! he beats you?" cried Ted, in a shocked voice.

"Yes," answered the girl, nodding. "When I don't behave, and come home without selling the flowers and whisky."

Ted looked at the girl with wonder.

"Don't you know that it is wrong, and against the law, to sell whisky as you do?" he asked.

"Why, no; is it?" she asked. "Grandma and Jack says it is not, and that only the enemies of Father Ketcham, who was murdered by bad men, say it is wrong because they wish to take away from us our only means of making a living."

Ted was dumb with amazement. The girl evidently was entirely innocent of any belief in wrongdoing in carrying on her part of the "bootlegging" business in which the Ketchams were engaged.

"I don't believe it is wrong," said the girl. "You are our enemy, and that is enough for me."

She turned to go, but looked at Ted again.

There was pity in the girl's heart for him, he was so bonny-looking and brave, so different from Jack Ketcham, who beat her when he was angry. She was more than half inclined to release this fine-looking boy, and take the chance of a beating when Jack found it out.

But the training of years, the lesson that she must not forgive one foe of the Ketchams, was strong in her, and she turned away, regretfully, and left him. At the bend in the passage, she turned again, and almost came back, as she saw Ted doubled up and fast bound, but this time she went on resolutely, and Ted heard the door at the end of the passage close.

Now he put his wits to work in good earnest. He had hoped the girl would release him, but he saw that the force of her education was too great to be broken down in a moment. He was sure that she was Isobel Parmalee, and he was determined to save her, in spite of herself.

As he was looking around, he saw something glitter in the ashes at the bottom of the chimney. His heart leaped at the sight. He knew what it was—the means of his deliverance. It was his knife, which had flown from his hand when he dropped down the flue, and which he had forgotten and "Three Fingers" had not seen.

Rolling and tumbling over the rough floor, he at last managed to reach it. But how to get it and cut his bonds was a different matter. His hands were so bound that he could not move a finger.

When he tried to pick up the knife, he just rolled over on his face in the ashes. He sat up, and laughed a little at his ridiculous efforts to reach the knife. He tried again and again, but always failed.

Ah, now he had the idea!

He rolled over toward it, and, after several efforts, managed to get the handle in his teeth. Then he straightened up, and carefully laid the knife upon his knees, and by slowly working his fingers around fixed it so that he could get a good hold on it with his teeth.

He then began to saw at the ropes that bound him. The blade was very sharp, but the knife rolled around so that he could never get a fair cut. But, by perseverance, and after an hour's work, during which the knife fell many times to the ground, when he had to roll over and pick it up again, he managed to sever one of the ropes, strand by strand.

With a laugh of triumph, he grasped the knife with a freed hand, and with a half dozen slashes was at liberty.

CHAPTER XI.

TED AND ISOBEL FLEE.

Now to get out of the still! Before looking for an avenue of escape, Ted destroyed everything in the place that could be used for the manufacture of whisky. He found in a back chamber of the cave a room in which were stored several barrels of the stuff, and these he broke open and emptied.

He had done that much damage to the cause of the "bootleggers," at least.

At the end of the passage into which he had seen "Three Fingers" and Isobel go he found a heavy door, of oak, which was locked and barred.

There was only one way to get out, unless he could climb up the chimney, which he examined. This, he found, would be impossible.

If he was to escape at all, it must be through the door, and he must cut his way out. Again he blessed his good fortune that "Three Fingers" had failed to see his knife, and had thus not deprived him of it.

It was a stout, Sheffield blade, of the finest steel—the only knife for a woodsman or plainsman to carry; one that would answer in every emergency, like a stanch friend. Ted knew the value of good weapons, of whatever sort, and the best was none too good. He knew that men had lost their lives because of an inferior cartridge, a cheap gun or an over or under-tempered knife blade. In the West, the best gun or knife that money could buy was none too good, and Ted and the young rough riders were always equipped with the very best weapon there was in the market.

Ted went back to the door, and examined the lock. It was a huge, iron affair, and he saw that by cutting away the wood around it he could lift it out and dispose of it. But the cutting was the thing. The door was of oak, and as hard as iron.

However, it was the only way out, and he began upon it. He creased it on three sides with his knife, and began to patiently cut away the wood.

According to the progress he was making, it would take him two days to cut out the lock. He smiled grimly as he thought of the prospect.

He had worked faithfully for perhaps an hour, when he heard the shuffle of feet outside, and at once ceased work.

Was some one coming? If so, his labors were at an end. Who came in, friend or enemy, was his deliverer. "Three Fingers" had removed his gun when he was tied up, but he had his knife, now considerably worn down by his cutting into the ironlike oak. But this was not enough. He needed a weapon to give a blow.

He ran back along the passage, and found a bar of oak, which had evidently been used as a lever. Grasping it, he hurried back to the door.

There was a key in the lock now, and Ted heard two men talking.

From what they said, it was evident they did not know he was within. So much the better! He would give them a surprise!

"Thar's sumpin' the matter with this lock," said one. "It seems to be wabbly."

"Reckon yer hand's wabbly this mawnin'," said the other, and they both laughed.

At last the fellow got the bolt sprung in the ward, and the door swung open.

"Bring in all the buckets," said the man in advance.

At that he entered, and Ted, who was past taking chances, swung the club he held upon the "bootlegger's" head, who went down without a murmur.

The man behind him saw the club descend, and, with a yell of fear, dropped the buckets and fled back along the passage. But Ted was at his heels, for he had leaped over the insensible form of the fellow he had clipped with the club and was following fast.

The man he was pursuing was so terrified that he made excellent time. And he had almost gotten away, when Ted leaped through the air, like a panther springing from the limb of a tree, and landed upon the fellow's shoulders.

He went down, with a grunt, with the breath knocked out of him, unable to move.

Ted immediately grasped him by the collar of his homespun, butternut shirt, and dragged him back along the passage.

The man he had struck with the club lay silent within the doorway, and Ted threw his companion beside him, and locked the door upon them.

Now he was free!

But he was without a weapon, save his worn knife, which was nothing with which to pursue so dangerous a man as "Three Fingers." Ted was wise in the ways of the West, and never underestimated an enemy's strength. The only way to find out what a man was worth in a fight was to "go to him," as the saying went, and Ted was not the kind to "start anything he could not finish."

What he wanted more than anything else was a reliable revolver that worked easy and with the sights filed off—a gun that would go off sympathetically at the least movement of the trigger finger. With such a gun, Ted was prepared to search the hills, into which he felt sure "Three Fingers" had fled. He knew that Ted was only in the van of the officers, who would be after him, now that the young rough riders had started the chase.

Where would he go? Ted answered it for himself. Where, except to Ketcham's Hole, where his father had held out against a strong force?

"Three Fingers" knew, as well as he knew that he was alive, that, even though he had captured Ted Strong, and left him to starve in the abandoned still, the young rough riders would not abandon his trail, and that he would eventually have to meet them. But he felt that the one most dangerous to him was out of the way. With

his idea in mind, he traveled back to the scene of his father's stronghold, as Ted had guessed he would. The girl he had left with one of his trusted men and his wife, in the small settlement near the store.

"Three Fingers" was speeding toward Ketcham's Hole when Ted poked his head out of the entrance to the cave which led to the still.

As he crept out of the cave, he saw a lad of about his own age coming along the forest path. He was examining a revolver which he held across the hollow of his arm in a caressing fashion, and was whistling softly to himself. Ted's gun had a broad, silver plate set in the handle, on which was an inscription showing that it had been presented him by the citizens of Strongburg. The boy was reading the superscription.

It was the gun "Three Fingers" had taken from him. Ted chuckled as he hid by the side of the path. It would soon be his again. Evidently, "Three Fingers," valuing it lightly, had either given or sold it to the boy. It was just what Ted needed in his business.

As the boy passed him, Ted left the shelter of the woods, and, with an incredibly swift movement, took the gun out of the boy's hand.

"Where did you get it?" asked Ted.

"A feller sold it to me," said the boy.

"All right; he stole it from me," said Ted. "How much did you give him?"

The boy hesitated a moment, and Ted knew he was lying. The revolver was empty, and Ted slipped it full of cartridges in a moment.

"You are a liar!" he said. "Hit the trail, and hit it quick!"

The boy turned and ran up the path like a scared jack rabbit, and Ted plunged into the woods.

He was headed straight for Ketcham's Hole, where he knew he would find "Three Fingers," arrived at his last stand.

Not very far up the trail he saw ahead of him the flutter of skirts, and, when he came to an open place in the woods, he beheld the slight figure of Isobel Ketcham, or Isobel Parmalee, as he knew her to be. He felt sure she was bound for the same place as himself.

He lingered behind, for he did not want to alarm her. No doubt she was following the instructions of the old woman to go to the rendezvous.

Ahead of them somewhere, Ted knew, was Fagotasse Creek, which he knew was now in flood. It lay between them and the "Hole." How was this young girl going to cross it? As he saw her plodding along in front, Ted knew that she was familiar with the woods, and would not get lost.

He heard the roar of the stream, and knew that they had come to the ford of the creek.

He could see the girl pause on the bank, but he did not dare to warn her of it, because he knew that, if he did, his mission would fail.

The girl removed her shoes and stockings, and prepared to wade the stream. In ordinary waters she could have done so safely, and probably had done so frequently. But now the water had risen by reason of recent floods.

As she stepped into the water, Ted crept closer.

He heard a shriek. The girl had followed the ford, but had slipped upon a rock and fallen into swift water.

Ted threw his gun belt from him, and dived into the pool in which the girl was struggling, and swam toward her. She had gone down for the second time when Ted got to her, grasped her by the shoulder, got her to shore, and he resuscitated her.

"You!" she exclaimed, when she opened her eyes and sat up. She believed she had been drowned.

Ted smilingly looked at her. "I told you I was your friend," he said. "Now, let us have a little talk while we are sitting here in the sun and drying our clothes."

The girl listened while Ted told of the villainies of the Ketchams, of her abduction, of her father, of the manner in which Jack Ketcham was evading the law and debauching whites and Indians alike, and of the danger to the country from his deeds. It took a great deal of explaining before the girl could understand her own position, and that she was the daughter of Seth Parmalee, one of the bravest and richest men in the West. But at last, by dint of Ted's patient explanations, she understood, and then she buried her face in her hands and wept bitterly for a few moments.

"Isobel Parmalee!" she said. "Will you take me to my poor father?"

"Sure," said Ted, heartily. "That's what I'm here for. But, first, I must go after 'Three Fingers,' whom you know as Jack, the man who beat you. I must get him!"

The girl thought a moment, battling with emotions that meant her life, past and future. She believed in Ted. Him she would follow, and she turned to him, and said:

"I will take you to him. He will kill you, if he can. He has said so, Ted Strong. Oh, don't let him do it! I need you now. I want you to take me to my father. I have grown sick of this life, but it is all I have known. I always knew it was not the best, and I have tried to learn better. You have shown me the way to home and better things."

Ted vowed deep down in his heart that he would reunite Isobel and her father, Seth Parmalee, the brave Western man who had fought the world and the outlaws for his daughter.

Together they journeyed on for a few miles. Then the girl laid her hand on Ted's arm, and, pointing to an opening in the rocks ahead, said:

"Go forward a few hundred yards, and you will come to the door of the house. It is open, waiting for me. Go in and meet him. Good luck, and God bless you, Ted Strong, King of the Wild West! I will wait for you here."

CHAPTER XII.

"THREE FINGERS'" LAST PISTOL PRACTICE.

Ted looked to his weapon, then strode across the space that separated him from the house at the end of the ravine.

The door was ajar, and he knew that behind it was the man for whom he was looking, and who meant to kill him, if he could, as soon as he should appear.

The house was a tumble-down affair, with cracks between the logs, and Ted, as he walked across the clearing, saw that he was being watched from between the logs by the greenish-gray eyes of his enemy.

He held his revolver inside the waistband of his trousers, with his thumb stuck in it in a careless way, so that he would not appear to be as concerned as he really felt.

He knew that the issue now was between him and the man behind the logs of this tumble-down cabin.

If he lost, the whole scheme of putting the lid on the country would fail, for no one would pursue it except himself, and "Three Fingers" would be emboldened by his defeat.

Besides this, he would lose the opportunity of restoring the girl, Isobel Parmalee, to her father.

This was a good deal of responsibility on the shoulders of the young rough rider, as he faced the situation before him.

Half a dozen men might be concealed within house. There might be only one. Ted was chances on that one.

But "Three Fingers" was not a chance most would go against willingly, especially with the against him.

"Three Fingers" was known as the quickest man the trigger in three States. Most of his murders been due to the fact that he could draw two guns fire twelve shots from them in a shorter space of ti of any man on record, except Billy the Kid.

In quarters where Billy the Kid was unknown "Th Fingers'" marksmanship was mistaken for that of well-known New Mexican killer.

This means that he could pump twelve shots from tw revolvers into a space that could be covered by a post card as fast as a gun could discharge the balls.

Ted did not fear this particularly, as he was pret quick on the trigger himself, but he was not courting total destruction at the hand of a professional gun fighter, if he could properly defend himself. He had known several gun fighters in his time, and had met them in combat, and was seasoned, so far as fighting was concerned; but he did not wish to rush to sudden death without being prepared for it.

The silence within the house seemed to him to have an ominous meaning, and his hand crept closer to his revolver handle.

He did not wish to begin the fight, but he wanted to be in it as near the beginning as possible. "A good start makes a quick finish," is a plains adage that he knew well, and in which he believed.

He wished "Three Fingers" would start it.

But the man within the house refused to do so. Ted thought his reason for delay was that he wished to make a sure thing of it.

When he was within ten feet of the house, and met with no fire, he was naturally somewhat surprised, and made a rush.

He dashed within the door, drawing his revolver as he did so.

Instead of meeting "Three Fingers" face to face, as he supposed he would, he was surrounded by six men, who leaped upon him simultaneously.

Ted backed off into a corner, determined to sell his life at the greatest price obtainable in the worthless lives before him.

The fellows who faced him seemed none too eager to [illegible] their courage against his, for he managed to hold [illegible] off. Then he saw that they were waiting for [illegible] one.

In a moment or two he was to confront the real leader of the force. A trapdoor opened in the floor, and "Three Fingers" leaped into the room. This, then, was the reason Ted had not been shot when he approached the house, and yet he could have sworn he saw the eyes of "Three Fingers" peering between the logs at him.

And he was right. "Three Fingers" had seen Ted approach the house, and had watched him come close to it. Then he jumped into the cellar that was dug below the house.

"Three Fingers" believed that he had Ted now where he wanted him, and had prepared a tomb for him beneath the old Ketcham house.

As Ted entered the house, he was surprised not to see "Three Fingers," but now, as he came into view, he saw that his enemy was unarmed.

"Here you are, just in time for the sport," said "Three Fingers."

"Very well," answered Ted. "I'm game for any sport you have to offer, so long as it is on the square."

"Three Fingers" laughed. "All's fair and square in this business, as you will find," he said.

"Well, what's it going to be?" asked Ted.

"We're going to have a little pistol practice first," said "Three Fingers." "I'm getting rusty in my shooting. Let me have a gun, one of you fellows."

One of his men tossed him a pistol, which he caught in his three fingers.

"This hand was mutilated in this very room," he said, "and I'm going to have some fun out of it, if nothing more, and perhaps a little revenge."

Ted had whipped out his own weapon; but, before he had a chance to use it, the revolver in the mutilated hand of the professional murderer crashed. Ted felt the shock of the bullet as his revolver was knocked from his hand with the cylinder smashed to pieces.

"Three Fingers" burst into a roar of laughter.

"Not so bad for a fellow with only part of a hand," he said.

Ted saw how really helpless he was, pitted against this fellow in pistol play.

He heard a succession of shots in a sort of rattle, so quickly did they follow one another, and heard the bullets smack into the logs around his head. "Three Fingers" apparently had taken no aim at all, firing from the level of his hip.

"Thar's your picture on the wall," said "Three Fingers." The men in the room shouted their applause of the performance.

Ted looked around curiously. There was a ring of bullets the shape of his head in the logs, and the bullets had come so close to his skull as to singe the hair in one or two places.

"Three Fingers" certainly was having fun and pistol practice at the same time, at his expense, and, while he did not enjoy it very much, he did not show any worry.

Ted nodded his head, to show his appreciation of the fellow's marksmanship.

"Three Fingers" had been provided with two revolvers, and with incredible swiftness began to shoot again. This time with both hands. As soon as he had emptied the two revolvers, two others were tossed to him, and he kept up his shooting, with hardly an appreciable intermission in the fusillade. The firing of the twenty-four shots took hardly that number of seconds.

When it was over, he laughed again.

"I'm getting sloppy in my work," he said. "I came near hitting you several times. That would have spoiled the fun, for it might have killed you suddenly. To be really humorous, your death must be slow, and by degrees."

"So that's the game?" said Ted. "I thought you said it was to be fair. I don't see where I get any show in it."

"Your part of the show is to furnish it," laughed "Three Fingers." "That ought to be enough for you. You didn't expect that we were going to let you do any of the killing, did you?"

"Give me a gun, and a fair chance, and I'd show you whether I would or not!" said Ted. "You're a bit of a coward, Mr. Jack Ketcham. I don't believe you ever killed a man in a fair fight in your life. Most of your wonderful exploits have been just common, cowardly murders."

"Curse you, don't you talk to me like that, or I'll give you more than I intended!" cried "Three Fingers," in a rage.

When in a rage like this, "Three Fingers" was a horrible sight. His eyes were green fires that burned like

[illegible] of an enraged animal, and his face was distorted with hate. Even his rough companions shrank from him, so horrible was the expression on his face.

But Ted looked at him fairly, and even smiled faintly, to see how badly this shot of his had hurt the coward.

"I'll make you smile before I get through with you!" shrieked "Three Fingers." "I'll trim you up so that your friends will not recognize you when they find you, if they ever do! First of all, I'm going to clip your fingers off, until you have a hand like mine. Then I'll take your ears for souvenirs. After that I'll shoot you to pieces gradually. How do you like that, my buck? There never was a man who gave me the laugh and lived to repeat it."

Ted realized the seriousness of his predicament now, and saw the wisdom of Bud's suggestion that he bring several of the boys with him when he ventured into Ketcham's Hills. But it was too late to think about that now. All he could hope was that something would interfere with the promised sport of "Three Fingers."

The murderer was sitting on the edge of a table, slowly and carefuly reloading all his revolvers from his cartridge belt.

Occasionally he looked at Ted, with a slow, aggravating smile. He knew that by delaying the promised mutilation with his pistols he would probably inspire the terror of anticipation in his victim, but Ted looked at him without a flicker of fear in his eyes, and at last "Three Fingers" became impatient.

"Oh, you needn't try to look so brave, my buck, when in your heart you're crying with fear!" he shouted. "I'll put fear into you before the end of the game, all right!"

The men were crowding around "Three Fingers," expressing their admiration of him, and reviling Ted.

Ted's sharp ear caught a faint sound outside, as if a pistol had been cocked, then a soft whisper.

He listened, with joy in his heart. Then, looking at "Three Fingers," he saw over his shoulder the head of Bud at the window.

There was a crash as Bud leaped through. At the same moment Ben Tremont and Kit Summers dashed in through the doorway, followed by Clay Whipple, while Carl and two other boys tumbled into the room on the heels of Bud.

The surprise was complete. Before "Three Fingers" could jump from the table, Bud held him by the throat, and had disarmed him.

Several of the desperadoes snatched up the pistols on the table and began to shoot. But, before they could do any damage they were down, and the fists of Ben and Kit were finishing them. Ted had leaped forward with the boys and helped in his own rescue.

It was as pretty a piece of work as one ever saw. The capture was complete.

"Now what do you think of it?" asked Ted, turning to "Three Fingers."

"I'll be killed now, all right!" sneered the villain.

"Not by me," said Ted. "I'm no murderer. But I think the State will have something to do along that line."

"Give me a gun and turn me loose, and I'll bet you'd all run like a lot of scared chickens," said "Three Fingers."

"I guess not!" answered Ted. "To prison for you!"

* * * * * * *

This exploit broke up the whisky-selling business completely. Ted and the boys smashed all the stills they could find in the hills, and poured out all the whisky. Inside of a month the lid was on so tight that the whisky business never interfered with the peace of the country again.

Ted took Isobel Parmalee to her father in Cheyenne; the old man's gratitude was overwhelming, and he offered Ted a big reward, which he refused.

But Isobel had a revolver of the finest description made for him, to replace the one "Three Fingers" had shot out of his hand, and on a gold plate on the handle commemorated the incident with the appropriate inscription, "To Ted Strong, King of the Wild West."

THE END.

Next week's issue of the ROUGH RIDER WEEKLY, No. 82, entitled "King of the Wild West on Guard; or, In the Cause of the Governor's Son," takes Ted on a mission of friendship for his friend, the governor of a Southwestern State, whose home and happiness have been disturbed by a band of clever and unscrupulous people, some of whom are members of his own household. Its unfolding is full of the most exciting incidents, and shows again, and in another light, Ted's pluck and resourcefulness. You will want to read this story, which will hold your interest from the first word until you reach "The End."

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